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January 12, 2004



One of two
touchdowns for
Southern California
wide receiver
Keary Colbert



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THIS WEEK



Joseph Addai and LSU turned the BCS picture upside down by beating favored Oklahoma in the Sugar Bowl, page 10

SportingNews
MAGAZINE

KNOW IT ALL

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SportingNews
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NFL draft forecast

If your team isn't still playing, we know you're already looking forward to the draft with an eye on that franchise quarterback or stud defensive lineman. Find out which prospects top the rankings at Draft Central, which provides comprehensive draft analysis every day of the year. Go to: <http://ultimate.sportingnews.com/nfl/draft>.

SportingNews
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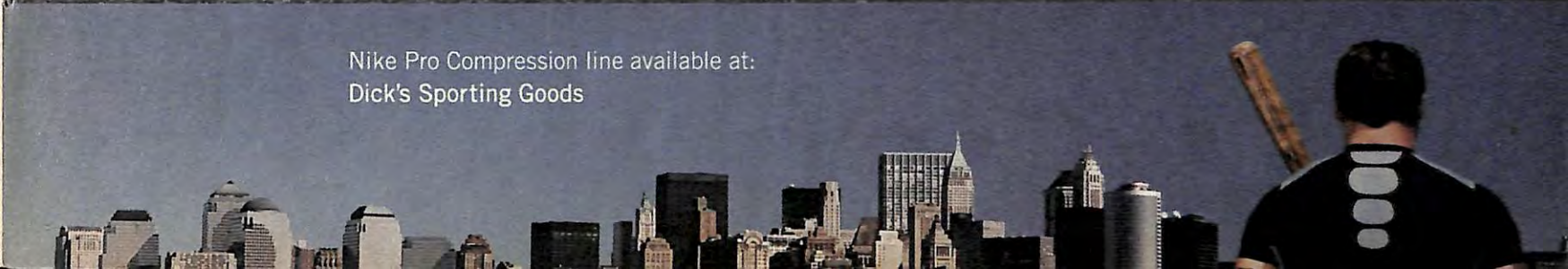
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7 Ways to pass the time while you're breaking Bill Snyder's curfew

To Know List

① NEW YORK STATE OF MIND

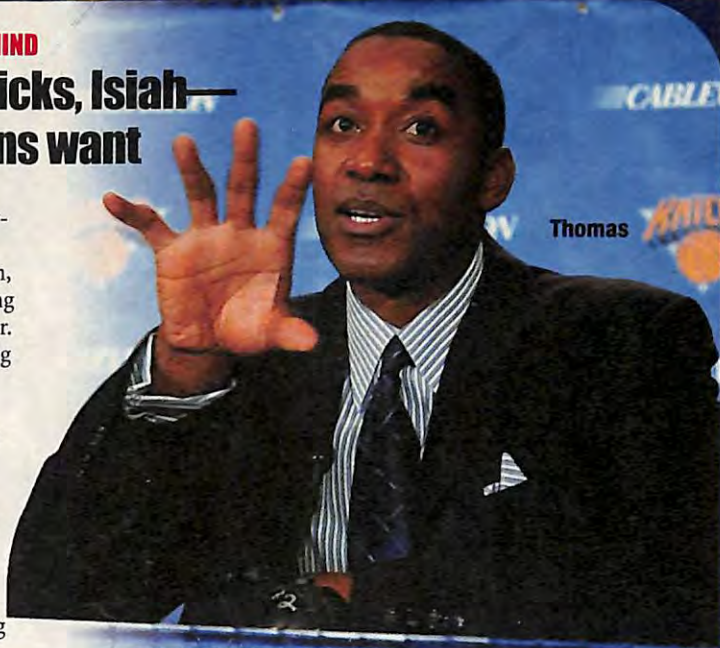
Rebuild the Knicks, Isiah—it's what the fans want

Isiah Thomas came into New York two weeks ago, having taken over for deposed general manager Scott Layden, and immediately began talking tough about the Knicks' roster. He set to work quickly, cutting Slavko Vranes, trading Clarence Weatherspoon for backup point guard Moochie Norris, making an offer to free-agent forward Eddie Griffin (who signed with the Nets) and preparing to sign another troubled free agent, Leon Smith. Meanwhile, the team responded well, winning four of its first five games under its new boss.

But let's catch our breath. Thomas' presence has nudged the team into playing with some accountability. The transactions he has made so far, though, are just window dressing. Vranes was the 15th man; Norris is a career backup. Even if Thomas trades rookies Mike Sweetney and Maciej Lampe—rumors say he will—it won't be a high-impact decision.

This is the meat on Thomas' plate: Should the Knicks rebuild? Thomas has indicated that he is too competitive to tear down the team and put it in a multiyear rebuilding plan, but that is the kind of stubbornness that cost Layden his job. There is an aura around New York management that says Knicks fans won't tolerate rebuilding—actually, after watching the brittle-boned has-beens who have worn blue and orange recently, most Knicks fans would embrace a young team with potential. That's the kind of roster New York needs—and there are a few things Thomas can do to get it.

Be careful with Antonio McDyess. Just a week into his new job, Thomas lamented the Knicks' salary-cap woes. Welcome to New York. In a nutshell, the Knicks pay out about \$90 million to players (the salary cap is \$43.8 million) and have done so for years. But those troubles will begin to clear up if management does not interfere. Charlie Ward and Travis Knight are slated to be free agents (that clears \$11 million), as is McDyess, who makes \$13 million. With those contracts gone, the Knicks would be in the



Thomas

mid-\$60 million range. Thomas must resist trade offers from teams looking to land McDyess and the \$13 million in cap relief that will come when his contract expires. Unless a knock-out deal that includes other expiring contracts and youth comes along, Thomas should sit still.

Give a Kurt response. Thomas should move quickly, however, on Kurt Thomas. The power forward was unhappy when he was abruptly benched in favor of McDyess in early December, saying he would not exercise his option next season and would leave New York. Thomas is a solid power forward, a good rebounder and a tough defender, but the Knicks should hasten his departure. He's 31 and on the downside of his career, but he has good trade value. If he can be sent away for another expiring contract and a draft pick, the Knicks should move him.

Get to the point. Thomas must figure out if a point guard duo of Frank Williams backed by Norris is good enough. Howard Eisley, who is owed \$13.5 million over the next two years, will not be easy to trade. Also in the mix is Milos Vujanovic, one of the top European point guards, whose rights belong to the Knicks. Trading Vujanovic could prove to be a colossal mistake, but Thomas isn't big on European players, and if including Vujanovic's rights helps get rid of Eisley, so be it. Thomas also would be amenable to rescuing Jamaal Tinsley, the point guard he once groomed, in a trade with the Pacers.

—Sean Deveney

② NBA'S IMBALANCE OF POWER

Even the Suns would rise to the playoffs in the East

Last season, the disparity between the Western and Eastern conferences was as wide as ever. The West was 250-170 in head-to-head games against the East, a winning percentage of .595. This season, the gap has widened even further. As of January 1, the West was 117-63 against East teams, a winning mark of .650.

But there is no better way to demonstrate how glaringly different the conferences are than to look at them in a playoff context. While the East is a punch line in most instances, the conference disparity is not a joke to West executives who have improved their teams but could still be left out of the playoff mix. Two general managers estimate that when a team stays alive for six games in a first-round series (ensuring three home games), it generates about \$2 million to \$3 million.

If the regular season had ended January 1, the Bucks would have been in the playoffs at 15-16, despite breaking up the team's core and starting over. What's troubling is that a look at the non-playoff teams out West reveals that each of them is good enough to be a playoff team in the East. While the rebuilding Bucks are collecting millions, there will be six playoff-worthy teams with a right to be pretty angry.

Sonics. Their style is similar the Bucks' and Raptors', both top-eight teams in the East, in that they run and get what they can from a small lineup. But the Sonics have better shooters than the Bucks or Raptors.

Trail Blazers. Dale Davis, Zach Randolph and Rasheed Wallace? In the East, the only team that would beat them is themselves.

Grizzlies. Hubie Brown's bunch has fallen on hard times lately, but Memphis has depth and size that's unmatched in the East.

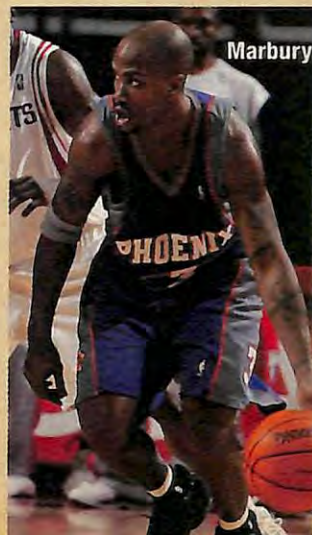
Warriors: No matter how much the Warriors struggle, they always can beat the East. They're 7-6 this year after a 19-11 mark last year.

Clippers: Elton Brand would compete with Jermaine O'Neal as the best all-around big man in the East. Chris Wilcox, Melvin Ely and Chris Kaman give the Clippers a deep front line that would be tough to handle.

Suns:

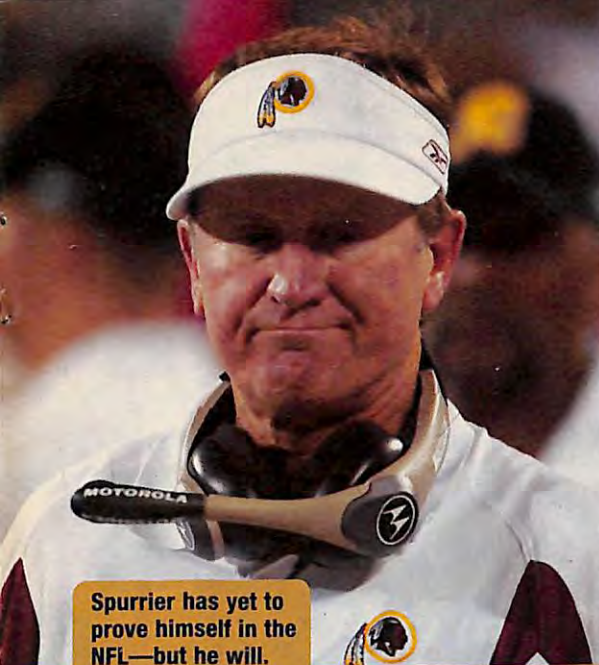
Stephon Marbury led the Nets to 31 wins in the East when all they had was Kendall Gill and Keith Van Horn. Imagine what he could do with Amare Stoudemire and Shawn Marion.

—S.D.



Marbury

JAMES NIELSEN FOR TSN



Spurrier has yet to prove himself in the NFL—but he will.

③ COLLEGE CAN WAIT

Spurrier is no quitter

In case you didn't know—that is, in case you live in a cave—Steve Spurrier has an ego the size of Siberia. Do you really think he wants his last image as an NFL coach to be that of a quitter? Forget about a return to college football; he has nothing left to prove. Spurrier will take a year off to recharge then have a staff and a plan ready for his return to the NFL in 2005.

There was reason to believe when Spurrier took the job in Washington two years ago that he would be successful in the NFL, only not with the Redskins and meddling owner Dan Snyder. My prediction: Spurrier will choke down his pride and wait for the Dolphins to collapse again in December, then humbly accept Wayne Huizenga's offer to coach a franchise that can't seem to find the postseason. He'll keep successful

BOB LEVERONE / TSN

④ YOU HEARD IT HERE

"(At Florida) Spurrier often told me when the game was no longer fun, he'd 'chuck it.' ... He has to be close to that breaking point."

—Matt Hayes, in the November 17, 2003, issue of the SPORTING NEWS

defensive coordinator Jim Bates—Spurrier's first coordinator at Florida in 1990 before some guy named Ron Zook—and fill the remainder of his staff

with experienced NFL assistants. He'll have control over personnel and he'll have an experienced quarterback—say, former Jaguar Mark Brunell, whom Spurrier admired during his days in Gainesville.

They'll have to fire Spurrier to get him out of the league this time. —Matt Hayes

⑤ ROY WILLIAMS' ROCKY BEGINNING

UNC coach is 'as frustrated as I've ever been'

Roy Williams is searching for new four-letter words to describe his North Carolina Tar Heels. "Somebody told me I shouldn't say 'crap' anymore," he laments. But Williams picked a bad time to go cold turkey.

His players have been brilliant at times. They also have been uninspired, inattentive and soft. That's not unlike last year, when they played for Matt Doherty (and eventually got him fired). Last Saturday at Kentucky, the Tar Heels fit all those descriptions and dropped their second game. They need to heal quickly. They play Sunday against Georgia Tech, then face Maryland, Connecticut and Florida State.

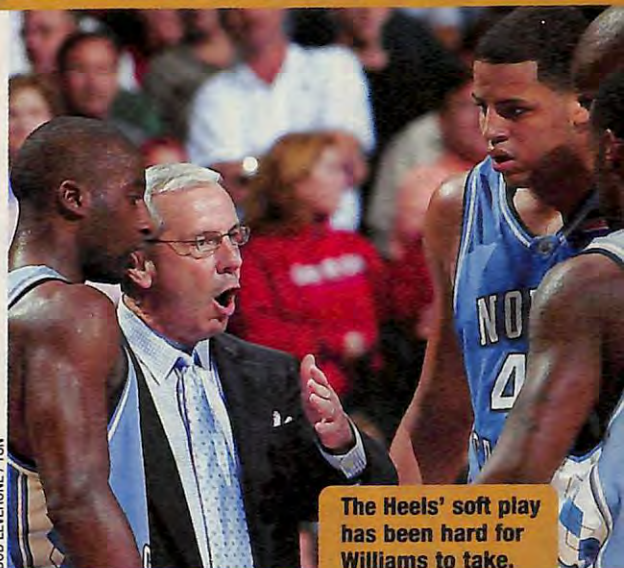
For an extended second-half stretch with the Kentucky game in the balance, Williams benched

three starters: point guard Raymond Felton for weak on-ball defense, power forward Jawad Williams for playing meekly and small forward Rashad McCants for general indifference to team concerns. The 53-year-old coach claims to be "as frustrated as I've ever been in my life."

The final indignity for the Heels against Kentucky was a game-clinching 3-pointer by Wildcats guard Gerald Fitch. Though Williams says his team works extensively on defending ball screens, center Sean May's slow reaction gave Fitch room to shoot as the shot clock lapsed.

"It's not about, 'Whose man is that?'" North Carolina guard Melvin Scott says. "It's a matter of everybody putting their selfish goals aside."

—Mike DeCourcy



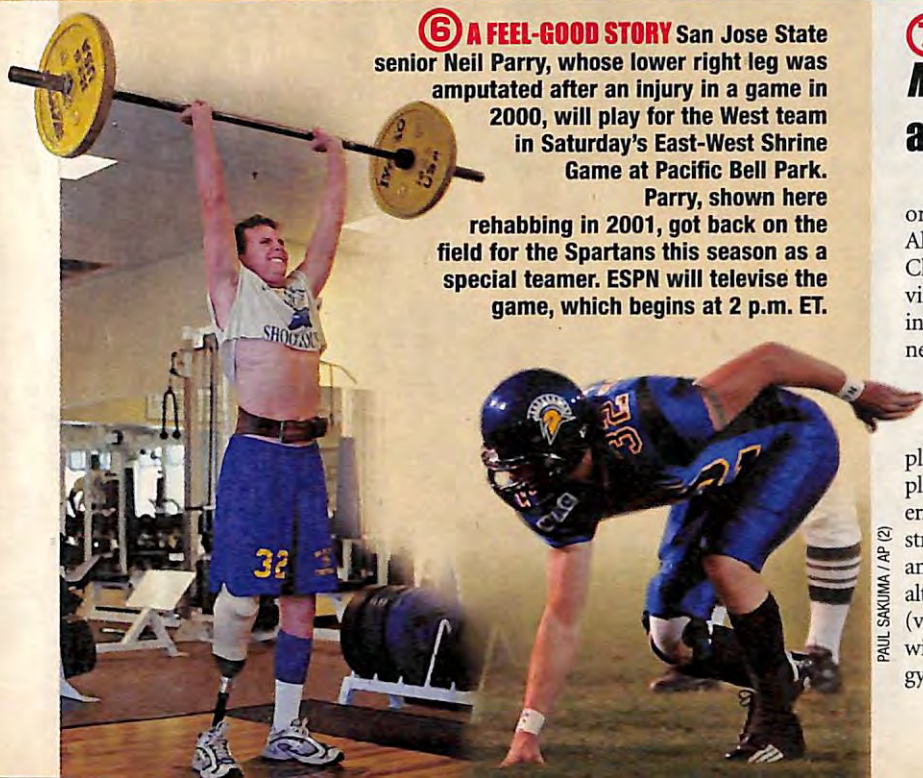
BOB LEVERONE / TSN

The Heels' soft play has been hard for Williams to take.

⑥ A FEEL-GOOD STORY

San Jose State senior Neil Parry, whose lower right leg was amputated after an injury in a game in 2000, will play for the West team in Saturday's East-West Shrine Game at Pacific Bell Park.

Parry, shown here rehabbing in 2001, got back on the field for the Spartans this season as a special teamer. ESPN will televise the game, which begins at 2 p.m. ET.



⑦ VIDEO GAMES

Madden 2004 wrongly portrays all NFL players as dancin' fools

It won game of the year honors at the Video Game Awards. All who got a copy for Christmas are dazzled by the virtual action and artificial intelligence. But *Madden 2004* needs a re-boot.

Madden 2004 is seen on ESPN's *NFL Matchup*, which dissects teams' signature plays with computer-generated players from EA Sports' best-seller. A December show demonstrated the Packers' counter trap and Ahman Green, whose cyber alter-ego broke for a touchdown (very realistic) then celebrated with a shoulder shimmy and gyrating dance (bogus).

In the flesh, Green is a conscientious non-demonstrator, more Walter Payton than Terrell Owens, aside from sporadic Lambeau leaps. Green claims such mischaracterization is no worry—"It's a video game. There's supposed to be a little fantasy"—and besides, he notes, every player depicted in *Madden 2004* gestures theatrically after big or routine plays.

Precisely the problem, and this ought to bother the man whose name is on the disc. Doesn't John Madden regularly condemn showboating from his *Monday Night Football* pulpit?

—Fritz Quindt

STARTING 5

CAUGHT ON THE FLY

The Chargers will pick first in April's draft, meaning they will be on the clock for about four months. To prepare, they will study tape of recent Vikings war rooms.

1

The end of the college football season. This is not to say all of the games stunk, but I haven't seen this many bowls go up in smoke since I interviewed for a job at *High Times*.

2

Baseball is back. Pitchers and catchers report in a few weeks, which means it won't be long before the couches of America are filled with sleep-ing 75-year-olds.

3

Coming soon to theaters. Facing the Evil Empire, the underdogs have no chance ... so their fans hunt down and kidnap Bucky Dent and Aaron Boone.

4

The Daytona 500. Testing starts almost a month before the event. All that preparation has to do with getting the car in perfect order and nothing to do with spending January in Florida.

5

David Wells. It was surprising to hear his boyhood dream was to pitch for the Padres. Seemed more likely his dreams would've involved cheese-burgers and Bo Derek.

—Matt Crossman

A different kind of diamond note

Erstwhile baseball beat man **Peter Gammons** is going to host *Hot Stove, Cool Music*, a charity concert in Boston that will coincide with the release of a CD that will feature music from **Theo Epstein's** band, **Paul Westerberg**, Letters to Cleo's **Kay Hanley** and Pearl Jam, though **Gammons already is reporting that Epstein is looking to swap Eddie Vedder for Dave Matthews**.

It's the place where the heat is dry—and the owner all wet

Bill Bidwill said he fired **Dave McGinnis** because the Cardinals often were "non-competitive" under McGinnis' direction. Fly has to rank that as one of the more interesting statements since overhearing part of the memorable conversation between Pot and Kettle.



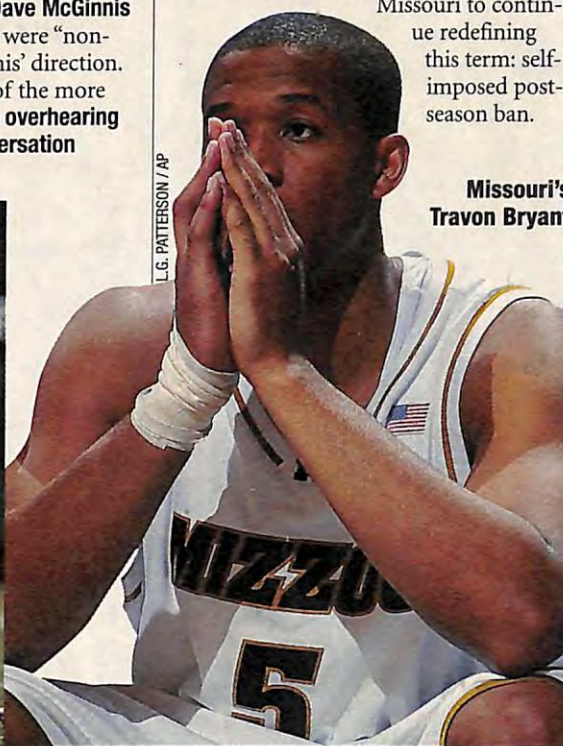
McGinnis

ROBERT SEALE / TSN

Will they still be eligible for the NIT?

The biggest early bust of the college basketball season? **Missouri, without a doubt.** The NCAA's watchdogs were supposed to be the biggest obstacle for the embattled program of Coach Q (not to be confused with, ahem, Coach K), but the Tigers are proving to be just as dysfunctional on the court as off it. Missouri was supposed to be a top five team, but it isn't even one of the top five teams in the Big 12. The lowest of the low points? A loss to Belmont, which at least will help

Missouri to continue redefining this term: self-imposed post-season ban.



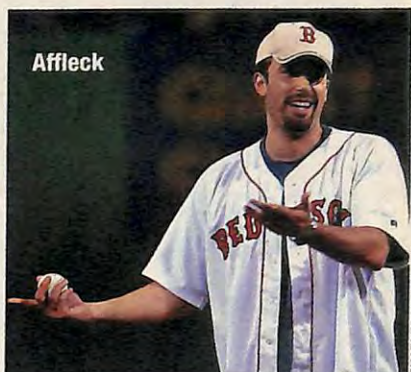
L.G. PATTERSON / AP

Missouri's Travon Bryant

The top 5

Already, **LeBron** and **'Melo** have been all but ticketed for the Hall of Fame, but **they aren't the only rooks who have shown more than a little game:**

1. **Dwyane Wade**; 2. **Chris Bosh**; 3. **Kirk Hinrich**; 4. **Jarvis Hayes**; 5. **T.J. Ford**.



CHARLES KRUPA / AP

And, finally ...

Passionate Red Sox fan **Ben Affleck** says

he'd rather utter the words, "I worship you, Satan" than "My favorite baseball team is the New York Yankees." When reached for comment, **Satan said, "I have no idea why my boyfriend has so much hatred toward the Yankees."**

Where can Fly apply?

Not a bad deal for **Dave Wannstedt**, huh? Less responsibility but not less money, plus more years on his contract. And as far as Fly can tell, Wannstedt still gets to take off December and January.

Hey, didn't you used to be the Bulls' scapegoat?

ON AIR

from the Century 21 Studios



Rick Ballou says: "Jamal Lewis and Ahman Green have been tremendous this year, but Priest Holmes is still the best. Scoring TDs is what it's all about in the NFL."

Bill Lekas 6-7 a.m. ET weekdays	Rick Ballou 10 p.m.-2 a.m. ET weekdays	Cliff Saunders 11 p.m.-1 a.m. ET Saturdays and Sundays
NFL's top running back	Jamal Lewis	Jamal Lewis
Baseball's best offseason move	Red Sox trade for Curt Schilling	Javier Vazquez to the Yankees
Most intriguing NHL team	Rangers	Red Wings
NBA's best sixth man	Bobby Jackson	Antawn Jamison
NFL's biggest disappointment	Buccaneers	Bills
Most overrated college hoops team	Cincinnati	Florida
Grade the college bowl season	F until there is a playoff	Incomplete until there is a playoff

Whatever is hot and happening in the world of sports, it's sure to be on the agenda when you're on the air with **Sporting News Radio**.

Knight's act is old, even in a new year

Bobby Knight did it again. During an interview alongside his former player and current Iowa coach Steve Alford, the King of Crude and Rude dropped the f-bomb on his innocent interviewer and was bleeped several times. Thank goodness it wasn't live.

When will he learn?

When will Texas Tech learn?

When will the NCAA learn?

I have found myself defending this guy over the years, writing him off as a spirited, competitive coach doing wild, crazy things in the heat of battle. But that wasn't the case a couple of weeks ago when the cameras were rolling on that interview.

How much more garbage will college basketball take from this guy? You can bet your mortgage that there will be more tirades from Knight as long as his employer and his regulator (the NCAA) continue to enable and embolden him.

If a Texas Tech history professor had been talking this way in public, I dare say he would be history himself. The university would be correct in dismissing him, freedom of speech notwithstanding. As a representative of a respected institution of higher learning, it is way past time for Knight to be held to a higher standard.

Mike Tyson bites off an opponent's ear and cusses like a drunken sailor, and we call him "manic-depressive."

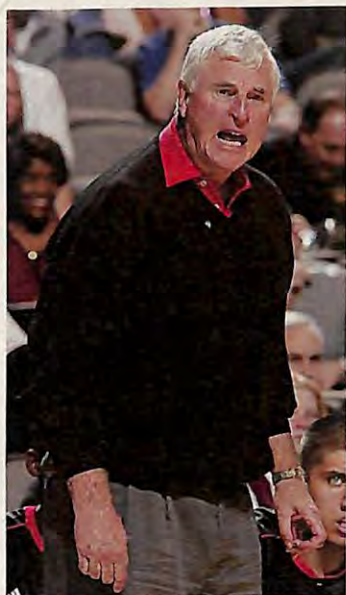
Dennis Rodman acts like Dennis Rodman, and we call him "a nut."

Knight, however, continues to get away with it. "That's Bobby Knight. He's a competitor," we say.

Knight is a time bomb waiting to explode. If Texas Tech won't do anything about him, the NCAA must before he hurts more than himself.

Meanwhile, Knight provides every other Big 12 coach with great recruiting material. If I were fighting Texas Tech for a recruit, I would just ask the player's parents if they really want their son under Knight's supervision.

For his language alone, Knight should have been fired. At the very least, he should have been punished in a manner in which he will feel it. When some kids misbehave, they get a "timeout." If Knight is going to continue to act like a brat, treat



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

If Knight is going to act like a brat, treat him like one. Put him in timeout—permanently.

him like one. Put him in timeout—permanently.

More musings on 2003 events and their ramifications for 2004:

■ UTEP hired Mike "Party On" Price to be its new coach. Price showed at Washington State that he knows how to build a respectable program and win games. There aren't a lot of distractions in west Texas—as long as he stays away from the margaritas. My guess is that Price will stay purer than Father Flanagan, and UTEP will emerge from obscurity to relative respectability.

■ First-year Bengals coach Marvin Lewis proved my theory that any search for a new head coach should start and end with a defensive specialist. Do you think the Redskins are wondering how they let that fish get away?

■ Nebraska fired Frank Solich for not winning enough in the post-Tom Osborne era. Their lengthy search for a replacement

reminds this Oklahoma alumnus of the treatment Gary Gibbs got after replacing the legendary Barry Switzer. By most standards, Gibbs was successful in his tenure as head coach. But he didn't meet OU's lofty standards, so he was shown the door after six seasons. It took longer than anyone would have thought to name his replacement.

Sound familiar? Cornhuskers fans should quake at the comparison. Does anyone remember a guy named Howard Schnellenberger?

■ On live national television, Joe Namath humiliated himself by treating ESPN sideline reporter Suzy Kolber the way he probably has treated women since he was Broadway Joe. Namath apologized and blamed his behavior on "Christmas cheer." Please. If Namath had true Christmas cheer, he would have treated Kolber as the professional that she is, not as another notch on his belt.

Here's a solution: Perhaps Kolber and other sideline reporters should carry breathalyzers for the purpose of prescreening the partying, nonplaying subjects of future interviews.

TSN

J.C. Watts, a former U.S. representative from Oklahoma and quarterback for the Oklahoma Sooners, is chairman of J.C. Watts Companies.

Your Turn

■ Joe Buck writes about how a handful of wealthy teams are making deals and spending money to improve for next season (TSN, December 29-January 5). He says these transactions will help baseball make a "big comeback." Obviously, he doesn't see baseball from the eyes of a 10-year-old. My nephew could stat me to death with his knowledge of his beloved Brewers. That changed when the Brewers traded their best player, Richie Sexson, because of finances. Yeah, baseball will make a "big comeback," but only in a few cities with wealthy teams.

Frank Rowe, Whitewater, Wis.

■ I am confused as to why Arkansas coach Houston Nutt's idea of recruiting includes using a prospect's minister "to go against what his mother wants him to do" (TSN, December 29-January 5). A more effective strategy might be to sit down with the parents and explain the benefits of having their child attend the university.

Steve Emery, Keller, Texas



DILIP VISHWANATH / TSN

Nutt

It is clear that J.C. Watts doesn't understand professional sports (TSN, December 8). Would Michael Jordan still be considered one of the greatest players of all time if he hadn't asked for the ball with the game on the line? I think not. When Keyshawn Johnson, Randy Moss, Jeremy Shockey or Terrell Owens asks for the ball more, it's not because of selfishness. It's a desire to win. Part of what makes a player great is his willingness to take on the responsibility of making plays.

M. Johnson, Cincinnati

■ George Steinbrenner ruined my Christmas. The day Andy Pettitte signed with the Astros was a terrible day—worse than the day I was laid off from my job of 12 years. It has been only two months since the Yankees lost the World Series, yet the current roster is unrecognizable. I guess moral values, dignity, respect for fans and being a good teammate mean nothing. Is there any pride in owning a patchwork team of unproven malcontents?

Jeannine M. Rippe, New City, N.Y.

Send letters to yourturn@sportingnews.com or to 10176 Corporate Square Drive, Suite 200, St. Louis, MO 63146.

HOW'S THAT FEEL?

To take your game into the broadcast studio

Kenny Smith, an NBA player for nine seasons, is in his sixth full season as an analyst on TNT's Emmy-winning *Inside the NBA*.

I didn't exactly know that I wanted to go into broadcasting. When I was a player, people in the media would tell me I was a good interview, but that doesn't make you a good interviewer or a good analyst. I used to come on TNT sometimes as a player. At some point, I was told, "You did a good job. You know, if you ever think of retiring, this could be a good opportunity for you." I was like, "Yeah, they say that to everyone," and didn't think anything about it. But then when the people at TNT got wind that I was actually going to retire, they called me. To be honest, when I first got involved with the show, it wasn't really vogue or cool to be an analyst on TV. Now everyone in the NBA wants to do it.

I didn't try to model myself after a particular analyst. I think that's where guys make a mistake. People don't want Charles Barkley or me to come in and be a news reporter. For me to come on and talk about the basics of what's happening in the game would be a disservice to viewers. They want to know what happens on the inside, from our perspective. For example, if you ever watch a baseball game, you always want to know what's said on the mound—kind of like in the movie *Bull Durham*. I don't think reporters can really know what's said in that huddle unless they've been in there.

I don't have a problem being critical of players, even former teammates. I can see you not getting back on defense. I can see that you were open but you didn't shoot. I can see that you were covered but you didn't pass. I can see those things. But guys get upset when you question their intestinal fortitude, their character, their heart. Those are things that can't be measured, but I do know when you should



Smith (center) with his "buddies on the couch," Barkley and Johnson.

have passed. And I can bring out the video footage and tell you when your right hand should have been up in the passing lane instead of your left hand. I can do that really well. You can't argue with me, and I think players respect that.

One time in five years a player has told me he was upset about something I said. I was actually a fan of his—but in that instance he was wrong. I told him, "You were wrong. It had nothing to do with me trying to knock you." He was like, "Well, OK, I just want to give you my side of the story." And so he gave me his side of the story. I did have a better perspective on it, but I still thought he was wrong.

When you're a player, you're consumed with your team. When you're an analyst, you pay attention to everybody. It becomes so clear what's successful in the league and what isn't. I understand the league better now, I think.

Inside the NBA is like three guys sitting on the couch. It's Thursday night, you call your buddies over and watch the game. You agree, you disagree, you laugh. That's what Charles, Ernie Johnson and I do ... we just get paid.

From Day 1, I was like, "You know what? This is fun." Every day tops the last here.

Driver's ed

A stick-and-ball fan's guide to NASCAR

Do Nextel Cup drivers have superstitions?

Yes, lots of them. The strangest one is that no NASCAR driver will eat peanuts at the track.

Buz McKim, coordinator of NASCAR's history database, traces the superstition to a race in 1937 race in Nashville. One of the drivers had a beef with the race promoter. He was so upset that he hatched a devious scheme to get the first five qualifiers to drop out of the race. His ingenious plan was to sprinkle peanut shells on their cars. Why peanut shells would cause a driver to withdraw from a race has been lost



Cox, died. Thus was born sports' strangest and most widely held superstition.

Walnuts, pecans, cashews? Fine, fine and fine—so far at least—as is everything else in the nut family. And please don't write to say a peanut is a legume.

—Matt Crossman

Upon further review ...

Bill Elliott's No. 9 Dodge was identified incorrectly in a diagram in the December 29-January 5 issue.

SportingNews

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The perfect fix for a TV on the fritz

Hello. Your friendly TV repairman calling.

I've still got your set here in the shop. It's working OK. Already receives 126 channels showing sports 24/7, and the picture hasn't had snow since that Raiders-Patriots playoff game. What more could you want?



Collinsworth

With a few modifications (some not yet available through Radio Shack) we could make this baby better than a 65-inch high-definition beer keg. The work order:

My diagnosis indicates too many games, too many time slots. Ergo, you need a TiVo digital recorder. It's \$12.95 per month, but no cassettes needed, it doesn't permanently flash 12:00, and—ta-da!—you can watch what you've recorded while TiVo is recording. Imagine coming home from work, seeing the first pitch of Yankees-Red Sox that occurred an hour ago, skipping commercials and two hours later catching up to the last

inning in real time. Tighter than Joe Buck's cell phone camera ...

This Zenith needs anti-virus software. Because any good idea, like flashing fantasy football stats on NFL Sundays, spreads like Ebola across networks. Like FOX Sports Net's new series, *Late Night Poker* ...

A conventional mute button is fine for silencing Dick Stockton when he forgets coaches' instant-replay challenges are invalid in the last 2 minutes, or Kevin Harlan anytime. Now meet the semi-mute button, inspired by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's CBS performances last winter. When actuated, no announcer is heard, only background audio. *Au naturel* sounds from a ballgame; ahhhh.

I also recommend HEPA filters, which remove irritants as tiny as .03 microns, or Regis Philbin, and ensure fresh air. Play-by-play blather and ordinary coach-speak analysis can't pass through, but Cris Collinsworth, Johnny Miller, Al

Michaels, *PTI* and the commercial for Reebok's Summit Jacket starring Donovan McNabb and Philadelphia do ...

Because FOX insists on shooting live football from Bob Uecker's angle in the corner above the end zone, and action at the 40-yard line from the opposite 20—heere's Ronco's Mr. Old-School Director! You get cameras at the 50- and 20-yard lines. Simply use the one closest to the ball. Always the best seat in the house ...

Stuff I can't fix: ESPN, which begat yellow first-and-10 lines in 1994, has added a red one indicating line of scrimmage on third/fourth down. (When there are 23 lines on your screen, bring the set in.) That giant sucking sound comes from Tom Jackson saying on *NFL Countdown*, "I'm thinking of a technical term for the Vikings' defense—they suck," or NFL Network's Being Rich Doesn't Suck campaign for Rich Eisen. Sorry; today's vernacular is as offensive as NFL Pro Shop spots, starring the fan who has a fetish for soiled "authentic apparel" and hides in a locker-room hamper. Eww ...

Smell-O-Vision, anyone? TSN

E-mail:

fquindt@sportingnews.com.

Fritz Quindt's STATIC

League Pass are being blacked out nationally. Now the only way to view those games—including six Kings exposures and three Lakers and Cleveland LeBrons showcases—is to become an NBA TV subscriber. Which also necessitates paying your cable operator extra for a premium digital tier, if it offers NBA TV. (Sidebar: It probably doesn't.)

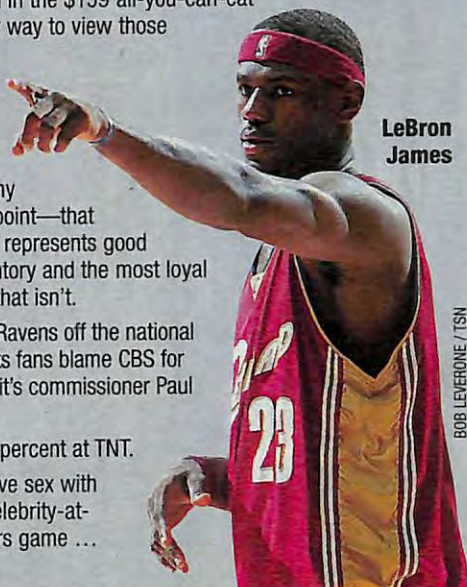
Stern's people say carping about die-hards having to pony up for hoops they thought they already bought misses the point—that NBA TV offers HDTV and other plums, and at pennies a day represents good value. But the bigger issue is erecting a wall between inventory and the most loyal fans, who swallowed hard to purchase an all-access pass that isn't.

■ **The buzz:** Though Brian Billick moans that ABC kept the Ravens off the national stage with a Saturday afternoon wild-card kickoff and Patriots fans blame CBS for targeting their team for another prime-time divisional game, it's commissioner Paul Tagliabue who makes the call on NFL playoff schedules.

■ **Vital stats:** NBA ratings are up 11 percent at ESPN, 33 percent at TNT.

■ **Soundbitten:** "Kobe (Bryant). Because I want him to have sex with me." —Nicole Richie, listing her favorite NBA player in a celebrity-at-courtside interview during the December 19 Nuggets-Lakers game ... seconds before FOX Sports Net pulled the plug.

■ **No such thing as a "free" throw:** David Stern Corp. is embarking on a bold new approach to make its beleaguered NBA TV must-see. Effective this month, 59 of the channel's games previously included in the \$159 all-you-can-eat

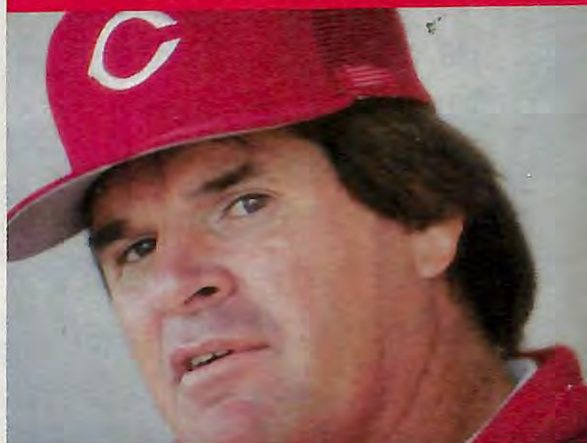


LeBron James

BOB LEVERONE / TSN



Pete Rose finally steps up to tell all.



After 14 years, he's ready to talk about everything. Including details he's never talked about before. Exclusively to Charles Gibson.



Primetime
THURSDAY
SPECIAL EVENT

THURSDAY NIGHT
January 8th 10/9c

Then Friday, Pete Rose will be answering questions live on

abc **GOOD MORNING AMERICA**
7am

USC

BOCS

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**The real national champs?
The Trojans, of course,
and we owe them thanks
for stripping naked a
system that just doesn't
work.** BY TOM DIENHART

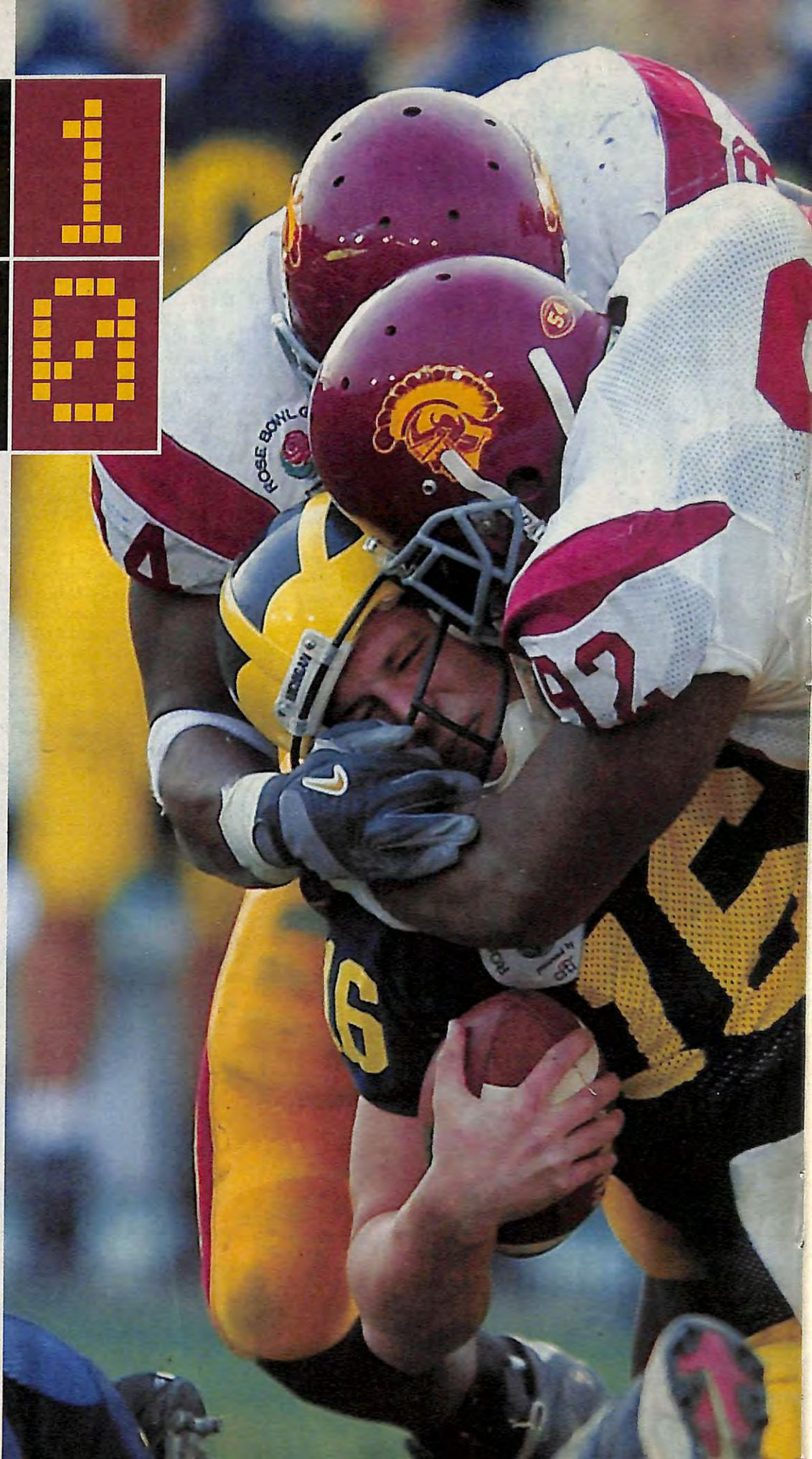
Take that, BCS. How does it feel to have your system trashed by a 12-inch cleat? The Trojans have kicked down the door of the Bowl Championship Series to become top dog, big kahuna, numero uno of the college football world, no matter how the guy behind the BCS curtain slices it.

"Everybody knows who the people's champion is," says defensive end Omar Nazel. "It's the USC Trojans, baby."

Oh, man, is the big fella right. USC capped a 12-1 season by thumping Michigan, 28-14, in the Rose Bowl, leaving the BCS honchos with their pants around their ankles. Not a pretty sight, but it had to be done. Thank you, USC. We knew this day was coming because the BCS has shown cracks since it was given a Frankenstein birth in 1998.

Nazel and the Trojans stewed for more than a month as many rallied to their defense but others claimed they were unworthy of a spot in the BCS title game in New Orleans. When the final lever was pulled, the BCS formula put USC No. 3, behind No. 1 Oklahoma and No. 2 LSU. The Associated Press poll, like the *SPORTING NEWS* rankings, had USC on top after the regular season. Heck, even the ESPN/USA Today poll that automatically bequeaths No. 1 status to the winner of the Sugar Bowl had the Trojans on top. It doesn't matter. Because TSN and the AP aren't bound by the BCS bozos; USC will wear a crown.

"As a member of the coaches' association and the BCS, I'm committed to vote the winner of the Sugar Bowl as the national champion," says Michigan





coach Lloyd Carr. "If I was a member of the media or the press, you could certainly make a case for Southern Cal. You could make me an honorary member (of the press.)"

The BCS geeks are left furiously pecking at their keyboards, scrambling for yet more ways to tweak the system. But how many facelifts can one endure before looking as bad as Joan Rivers? No, any remaining shreds of credibility the BCS has are thinning. Not that there's anything so horribly wrong with a split title. Strong cases can be made for both USC and LSU. In a way, this whacked-out system worked—but the stronger case can be made for the Trojans.

Says quarterback Matt Leinart, USC's Rose Bowl MVP, "There is no doubt in my mind that we are No. 1."

White (right) and the Trojans' offense put up big numbers, but it was the USC defense—which brutalized Navarre (left) with nine sacks—that wrapped up the victory.

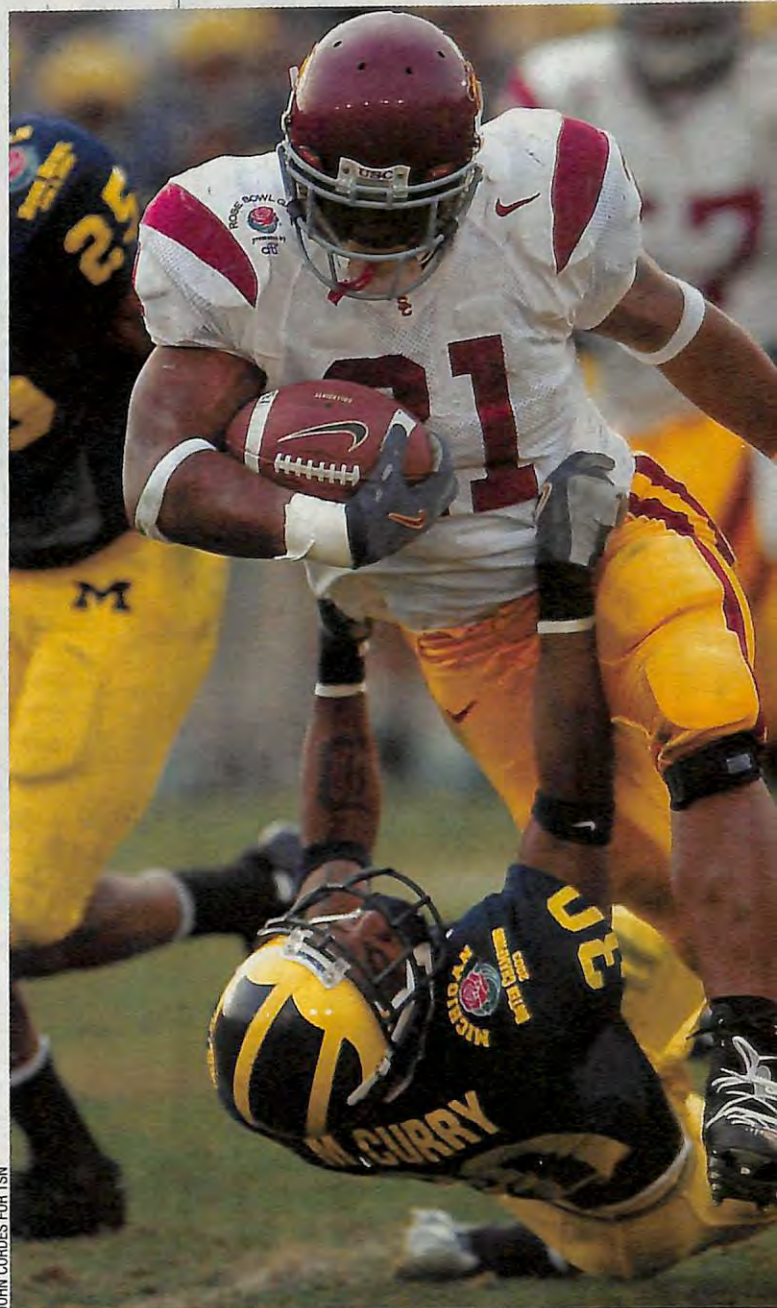
Take that, Pete Carroll doubters. How does it feel to have a finger wagged in your face for not believing in Carroll when he was hired three years ago?

They still talk in hallowed Heritage Hall about the first time Carroll met the press as USC head coach. As he answered questions, he rubbed his hands like an expectant father and paced like a caged dog. The excitement and anticipation of the opportunity intoxicated him. Carroll had to be told to stand still because the microphones weren't picking up the sound of his voice. While meeting with reporters in the aftermath of the press conference, Carroll eyed some of his players in another area of the room. He quickly bolted mid-sentence to greet them.

It's all about the players with Carroll. Connecting with youngsters takes a knack, and he has it. His hair says gray but his heart says, "Let's play." His predecessor, Paul Hackett, had the warmth of a shovel. He was better served diagramming plays than motivating. John Robinson's ruinous sequel wasn't blamed on an inability to communicate; rather, he failed to develop a strong staff, letting loyalty blind him. How bad had it gotten? In the five seasons before Carroll,

the Trojans went 31-28 overall, 17-23 in the Pac-10.

Carroll is no Tony Robbins wannabe full of buzz phrases. He can coach. He's the defensive coordinator, which is a strange union for a head coach, but it works. And it's the defense that has been the core of the Trojans' rebirth. Still, Carroll's hiring drew yawns and shoulder shrugs across the nation. The guy hadn't worked among ivy-covered walls, mortarboards



and marching bands since 1983. And that was at Pacific, which doesn't even have a football program anymore. Carroll had become an NFL guy, but deep down he was miscast. Oh, he could handle the work, but his rah-rah style rubbed million-dollar linebackers the wrong way. Pride? Tradition? Come on, those guys have chrome rims to shop for and portfolios to manage.

Carroll's fist pumping fits the Saturday fight song

JOHN CORDES FOR TSN

JOHN CORDES FOR TSN



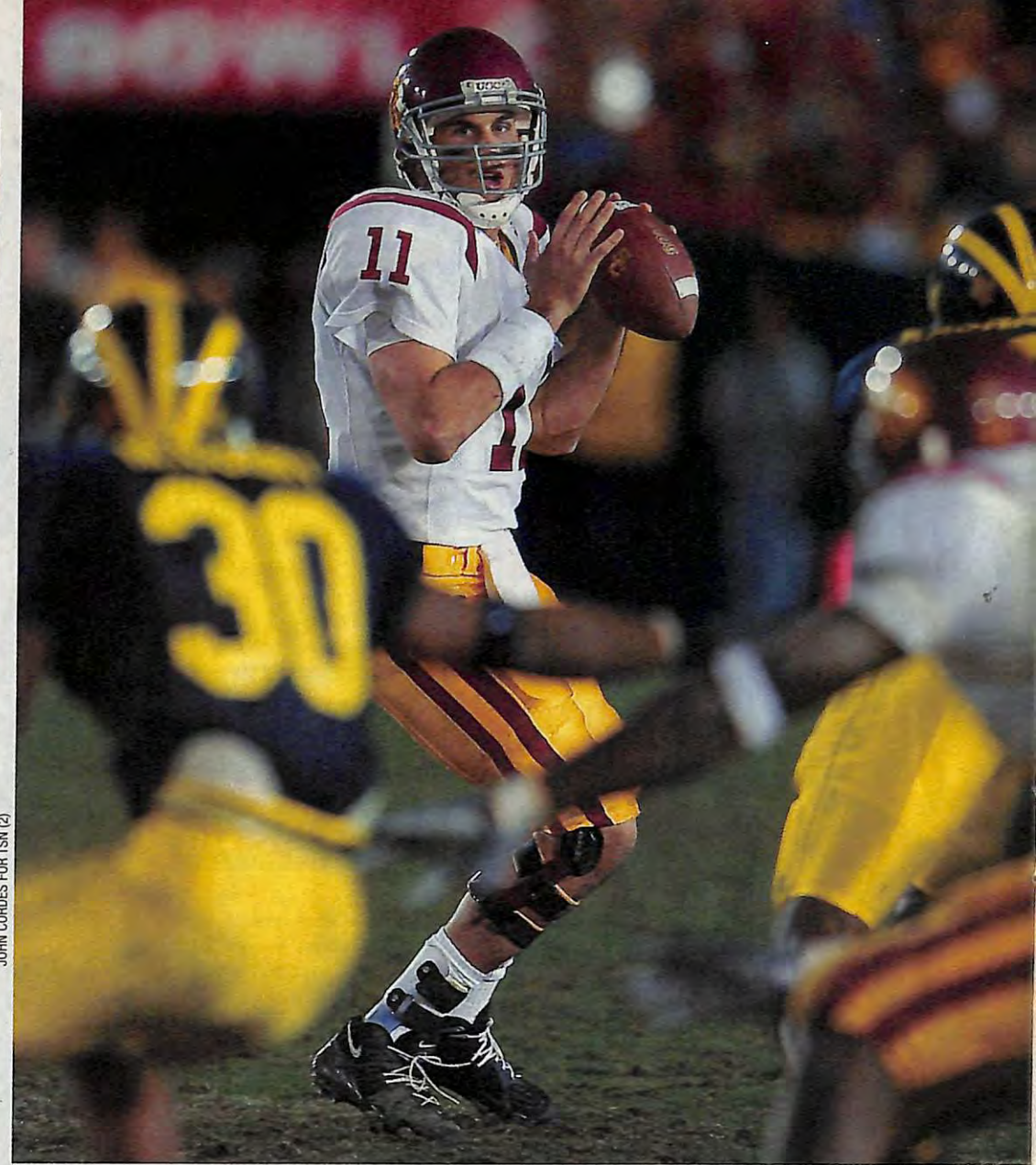
JOHN CORDES FOR TSN (2)

The Trojans' passing game—with Rose Bowl MVP Leinart (center) connecting with Colbert (above) for two touchdowns and Williams for big gains—helped cover for a stymied running game and left the always exuberant Carroll with a bigger smile than ever.

crowd. Better yet, his style fits the players. You won't find Carroll standing atop a Bear Bryant tower, barking commands into a bullhorn. Nope, this 52-year-old takes an active role in practices. You may see him dive into a pile during a scrimmage or play quarterback during a drill. It makes you wonder what took Carroll and college ball so long to fall in love. Regardless, this is a full-blown, googly-eyed affair that has no end in sight. Knowing that now, it's hard to believe Carroll's hiring was greeted with so little enthusiasm.

But that's what you get when a school ends up with Choice D. Dennis Erickson and Mike Bellotti each rejected the job, using it to sweeten their deals at Oregon State and Oregon, respectively. Athletic director Mike Garrett also courted Mike Riley, a former Trojans assistant, but the San Diego Chargers wouldn't let Riley out of his deal. That's when Carroll's phone rang.

The guy was out of work after head coaching stints with the Patriots and Jets. Carroll spent the 2000 season serving as a consultant to NFL and college teams, among other doodad jobs. And so when Carroll went to meet Garrett and Co. at USC, it



wasn't exactly a "Fight On" moment. But that would change with the swiftness of a Santa Ana wind.

America didn't know what it was about to witness after Carroll led USC to a 41-34 win over Arizona on October 27, 2001. That followed a 2-5 start and began a 27-4 run toward the Pac-10's first national title since Washington won a share in 1991.

Take that, USC naysayers. How does it feel to get head-butted for not believing the Trojans had what it takes to win the national title?

Yeah, many thought the Trojans were good enough to win the Pac-10 again, but national championship talk was reserved for the likes of Oklahoma, Miami, Ohio State, Michigan and Auburn. The Trojans were patted on the head and told to come back in 2004. But they nudged their way to the big table and aren't leaving. The snapshots of talent on display in the Rose Bowl were stunning.

■ 8:45 of the first quarter: Junior defensive tackle Shaun Cody bursts through the line and blocks a field goal. Click.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

■ 8:08 of the first quarter: Leinart tosses long down the middle to senior Keary Colbert, who extends both hands up and away from his head to grab a 25-yard scoring pass. Click.

■ 4:50 of the second quarter: Leinart hits freshman running back LenDale White with a short pass. After making a nifty sidestep, the burly back breaks a tackle and scores. Click.

■ 1:20 of the second quarter: Freshman defensive tackle Manuel Wright dumps Michigan quarterback John Navarre for an 8-yard sack. Moments later, Wright bats down a Navarre pass. Click.

■ 13:45 of the third quarter. Leinart—who finished the game 23-of-34 for 327 yards and three touchdowns—spots Colbert deep down the sideline. Colbert fights off a defender, extends his right arm and makes a stunning one-handed catch for a 47-yard touchdown. Click.

■ 3:44 of the third quarter: Leinart hands off to sophomore running back Hershel Dennis, who promptly pitches to reversing sophomore wideout Mike Williams. Williams stops and chucks a perfect pass to Leinart, who sprints 15 yards down the sideline for the touchdown. Click.

Field of dreamers

It's impossible to mention 2004 national title contenders without beginning with Southern California, which returns 17 starters and many talented backups who haven't even smelled the field. Still, don't think there won't be a couple of surprises from the teams that have at least a chance to beat USC to the finish line.

OKLAHOMA The defense, the foundation of OU's success under coach Bob Stoops, will change with the loss of some key players and co-defensive coordinator Mike Stoops. But the offense that scored 50-plus points seven times returns intact. The passing game will carry the offense in most games, but OU must find a way to run with more success, possibly by adding more zone blocking instead of relying on a line built for pass blocking to clear the way in the running game with man blocking assignments.

GEORGIA No team in the SEC has more talent. The Bulldogs stumbled home in 2003 with an inordinate amount of injuries—25 players missed at least one game—and still won 10 games. Georgia found a talented 20-carry tailback in freshman Gregg Lumpkin, and a nasty defense will get back stud defensive linemen Will Thompson and Kedric Golston from seasonlong injuries. Quarterback David Greene didn't have spectacular numbers but made huge strides in his junior season considering injuries handcuffed the running game. Coach Mark Richt says Greene is as good as any quarterback he has coached—including Heisman Trophy winners Charlie Ward and Chris Weinke.

LSU The potential loss of underclass NFL draft-eligible prospects—wideout Michael Clayton, defensive ends Marcus Spears and Marquise Hill and linebacker Lionel Turner—would leave the Tigers with inexperience at positions that carried the team this season. Players from coach Nick Saban's nationally ranked recruiting classes are moving into starting positions—wideouts Skyler Green and Dwayne Bowe and defensive tackle Brandon Washington—and LSU still will be the class of the SEC West. But the league schedule includes games at Georgia and Florida, a brutal road to a third league championship in four years.

FLORIDA STATE The good news: The 'Noles are loaded offensively, with as much talent as any team this side of USC. Offensive coordinator Jeff Bowden says FSU will develop ways to get tailbacks Leon Washington and Lorenzo Booker in the game at the same time, isolating them in space on slower linebackers. Now, the bad news: The defense has to be overhauled, but young linebackers Ernie Sims and A.J. Nicholson and defensive end Kamerion Wimbley are stars in waiting.

TEXAS The Longhorns are part of this list on talent alone, certainly not because of their big-game history. At some point, Texas will stumble into a win of significance. Or maybe not. Dual-threat quarterback Vincent Young will be more dangerous with a better grasp of the offense, and the loss of tailback Cedric Benson won't hurt as much with the emergence of Selvin Young, who some on staff believe could have won the job from Benson this season had he been completely healthy. —Matt Hayes

And so it went, the offense and defense taking turns capturing Kodak moments. While USC's ground game sputtered, the air attack compensated, thanks to Colbert's six catches for 149 yards and two scores and Williams' eight catches for 88 yards. The big plays rendered moot Michigan's nearly 9-minute edge in time of possession.

Then there was true freshman running back Reggie Bush, a blend of jukes, jabs and jets who ran for 41 yards, caught two passes for 42 yards and was the Trojans' primary return man. Go ahead and stamp Bush a star, a snoot full of fresh air after the stench of the Maurice Clarett soap opera.

Though coordinator Norm Chow's offense totaled 410 yards, this game was won—fittingly—by Carroll's defense. The line was particularly impressive, limiting the Wolverines to 49 yards rushing on 38 attempts. And then there was the mistreatment of Navarre. The poor guy was sacked nine times amid a shower of blitzes. USC defensive end Kenechi Udezue was the lead bagman, registering three sacks and four tackles for losses.

"My biggest fear coming in was USC was extremely quick with their front four," says Carr. "The guys up front really did a number on us. They did a great job getting off the ball."

And the misery is just beginning for opponents. Of the 48 players on USC's two-deep roster, 36 are non-seniors. That figure includes 17 starters—seven on offense, eight on defense and the kicker and punter. What does it all mean? USC is going to be eating with a big knife and fork for a while.

This could be the beginning of a USC run of dominance similar to the program's glory years in the 1970s, when the Trojans won three national titles. The exploits of players such as offensive tackle Marvin Powell, linebacker Clay Matthews and running backs Charles White, Anthony Davis and Ricky Bell fueled USC pride and gave Traveler a workout running up and down the sidelines of the Coliseum.

Take that, Sugar Bowl supporters. How did it feel to have your "national title" game trumped by the Rose Bowl? LSU, Oklahoma and USC each entered the postseason with one loss. But take a closer look at each team's defeat. The Sooners got smashed by Kansas State in the Big 12 title game, meaning OU wasn't even champ of its league. Please. LSU's loss came on its own turf to a good but not great Florida team. Come on.

The Trojans' defeat was in three overtimes at California, a rising program that dumped Virginia Tech in the postseason. In the end, LSU and Oklahoma were good, but USC was a smidgen better.

"We know what we accomplished, and we know how it feels to accomplish what we did this season," says Carroll. "I think it's quite clear we did everything we could do this season."

Take that.

TSN

E-mail associate editor Tom Dienhart at tdienhart@sportingnews.com.

The Big Easy



In a BCS title game left for dead by many poll voters, LSU's devastating defense tore apart high-scoring Oklahoma BY MATT HAYES

Constantly harassed by blitz-happy LSU, White (top) endured his worst game of the season.

Yeah, well it doesn't *feel* insignificant. So the media say one thing, the coaches say another, and polls, bowls and imperfectly attained goals are twisted up so tight, you need silicon (the obvious computer reference) to separate them. The game, steeped in tradition, begins as a jumbled joke on this joyous Louisiana night. Like any of that matters to the boys from the Bayou.

Been 45 years since they last partied like this in Cajun country, since LSU football meant something other than an opportunity to get oiled on Saturday night. Think these guys care what some fish-wrap writer in Wyoming thinks about the national championship? After the Tigers' 21-14 victory over Oklahoma in the Sugar Bowl, it'll be decadence and debauchery in the Big Easy through Mardi Gras. Excuse me, ladies? Those tops usually come off in the French Quarter, not the fourth quarter. There's more than one way to draw attention to your, uh, team.

Here are a couple that matter: the nation's best defense and a coach that just about every team on the planet—college or NFL—wants because of the way he has built this burgeoning monster of a program and secured its first national title since 1958. Might make that fella in Wyoming think twice about that championship poll vote.

"It doesn't matter what anyone thinks," says LSU coach Nick Saban. "It matters what happens on the field. We followed the system."

No matter how flawed it is. The wild ride began earlier in the day with Mike Tranchese, the Big East commissioner and Bowl Championship Series coordinator—how's that for an oxymoron?—going off the deep end on the convoluted system at a morning press conference. "Get rid of the computers," Tranchese said. "I hate those things."

His meltdown essentially explained where the Big East stands in the next round of BCS negotiations (here's a hint: It's out) and summed up a week of

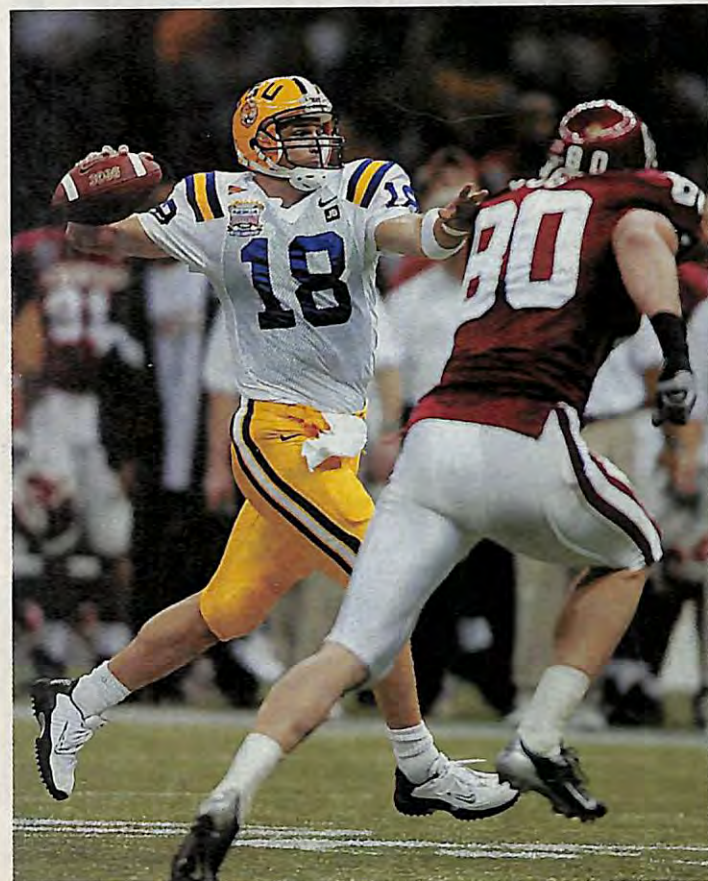
indifference and Rose Bowl envy.

While Southern California was dusting off Michigan three days earlier and making coaches do a double take about their agreement to make the BCS champion automatically their national champion, Oklahoma and LSU were thumping their chests and asking, "Why not us?" But the country was fascinated with USC's thrill-a-minute offense and a bowl win over Michigan that apparently left



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

While Webster (above) and the LSU defense controlled the game, the Tigers' offense did its part, gaining 312 total yards, including 124 on the arm of quarterback Matt Mauck.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

no doubt about the national champion. Well, Oklahoma had a pretty good offense, too. Scored 50 or more points seven times this season and had a Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback who had made defenses look silly all season.

Then OU lined up in the Sugar Bowl. And that offense—the same one that a month ago had every pundit with a pulpit claiming the Sooners might be the best team ever—had 79 yards after the third quarter. Both of tailback Kejuan Jones' short touchdown runs were set up after LSU turnovers gave the Sooners good field position, once at the Tigers' 3 and once at the 31. So that final score is a little deceptive, although not quite as deceiving as LSU's "jailbreak" defense, which harassed and bottled up the OU offense all night with stunts and twists on the line and bizarre blitz packages from linebackers and safeties.

The plan was predicated on pressure: Force OU quarterback Jason White into hurried throws, affecting his accuracy. When White can set his feet and square his shoulders, he rarely misses. So LSU brought blitz packages from everywhere on the field, pressuring White into his worst game of the season. Most teams have about 10 blitzes and a handful of coverages. LSU has nine coverage packages and more than 50 blitzes, a majority of which Saban gleaned from his days as an NFL assistant under Bill Belichick. "You should've seen how confused we were a few years ago when we first saw it," says cornerback Randall Gay.

Confused? The OU offense looked like newbies walking down Bourbon Street with eyes wide open. The line couldn't protect White, and

FANTASY GAMES

OK, playoff breath. We know you're dying to know how Southern California would fare in matchups with LSU and Oklahoma, both of which could have happened if college football had—don't say this too loudly—a March Madness-like event. We can dream, can't we? Here's how such games would unfold—without Dick Vitale, of course. —T.D.

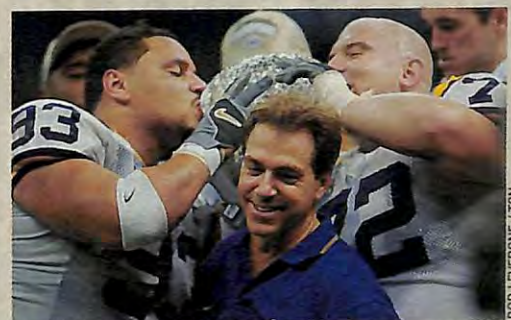
USC vs. LSU

Trojans coach Pete Carroll and Tigers boss Nick Saban are defensive geniuses, so it's no wonder the defenses are the backbone of each squad. So, consider that side of the ball a wash, though the Trojans might deserve a slight edge because of their awesome line that has an uncanny combination of speed and size.

The difference would be on offense. LSU would have a slight edge along the line, thanks to guard Stephen Peterman and tackle Andrew Whitworth. Each club effectively uses a committee of running backs, but USC's thunder (LenDale White) and lightning (Reggie Bush) duo is a bit better. But the biggest disparity is at receiver. LSU's Michael Clayton is a future NFL player, but USC possesses an unmatched tandem in Mike Williams and Keary Colbert, who each boast above-average speed and exceptional size.

As for special teams, Bush is a dynamic return man, Tom Malone is an All-American punter, and Ryan Killeen already is one of the best kickers in USC history. Enough said.

Winner: USC.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Saban is a defensive whiz, but USC has a coach at his level and a dynamite offense to boot.

USC vs. OKLAHOMA

The offenses are mirrors of each other, with Oklahoma quarterback Jason White getting a tad of a nod over USC's Matt Leinart because of his experience and savvy. The deep receiving and running back units would cancel each other out, as would the strong lines, though Oklahoma's front showed some holes late in the season. The special teams also would be a push. So this contest would be determined by defense.

Everyone talked all year about how the Sooners had the nation's best group of stop troops. It didn't look that way in a blowout loss to Kansas State in the Big 12 title game. But try to name a time the past two seasons when the Trojans' defense was trashed. You can't. You also can't identify any soft spot on the unit. The line has no peer, which would make life easier for a back seven that already is toothy thanks to players such as cornerback Will Poole and linebacker Melvin Simmons.

Winner: USC.

TSN's Final POWER POLL

Team (preseason ranking)

1. USC (6)
2. LSU (13)
3. Ohio State (2)
4. Oklahoma (3)
5. Miami, Fla. (5)
6. Michigan (4)
7. Georgia (11)
8. Iowa (—)
9. Kansas State (7)
10. Washington State (—)
11. Miami, Ohio (—)
12. Mississippi (—)
13. Maryland (17)
14. Texas (8)
15. Florida State (14)
16. Boise State (—)
17. Utah (—)
18. Purdue (12)
19. Clemson (—)
20. Tennessee (16)
21. Nebraska (—)
22. Oklahoma State (22)
23. Minnesota (—)
24. Bowling Green (—)
25. Arkansas (—)

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the receivers couldn't get off the line of scrimmage against tight man-to-man coverage from Corey Webster, Travis Daniels and Gay. The Tigers noticed from film study that White tends to drop to a three-quarters throwing motion when he moves in the pocket, and any lineman or anyone blitzing from the back seven came in with arms up when White released the ball. That contributed to four passes being knocked down and White's normally clear throwing lanes getting clogged.

The plan was close to perfect. Those 14 points OU scored managed only to keep the game close when it really shouldn't have been. Even when it got interesting, when OU had two chances to tie and potentially extend it into overtime, the LSU defense took the glimmer of hope away. The blitz forced White to overthrow Jones, who was wide open in the end zone with fewer than four minutes to play, and forced a poor throw in the end zone on fourth down that was tipped, though Mark Clayton almost caught the ball as it fell.

A series later, White threw three straight incompletions, and the last offensive play of the game ended, fittingly, when linebacker Lionel Turner used



LSU's tight coverage gave Oklahoma's receivers little room to operate.

BOB LEVERONE / TSN

a delayed middle blitz to foil the blocking scheme. He came unblocked and barreled over White before he could get rid of the ball. When it was all over, when White had been pressured more than 20 times, sacked five times and knocked down, battered and bruised, the numbers told the story. He completed just 13 of 37 passes—missing his last eight—for 102 yards and two interceptions. The Sooners, who averaged 461 yards the first 13 games of the season, finished with 154 total yards.

"The best defense we've faced since I've been here," OU coach Bob Stoops declared.

Strong words and a strong endorsement. Funny thing is, several USC players said after the Rose Bowl that they wouldn't even watch the Sugar Bowl because, well, they were national champions. What's the sense? "The way we're playing now, I'd put this team up against anyone," quarterback Matt Leinart said.

The way LSU is playing, wouldn't you love to see it?

TSN

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TROPHY HUNTERS

The last guy with a shot to repeat as a Heisman Trophy winner was Ty Detmer. The 1990 winner, Detmer finished his career at Brigham Young with the best passing numbers in NCAA history, but he failed to repeat as the Heisman winner, finishing third in the 1991 voting behind Michigan receiver Desmond Howard and Florida State quarterback Casey Weldon.

Detmer followed in the footsteps of Oklahoma running back Billy Sims, who returned to school after a Heisman season in 1978 but finished runner-up to USC back Charles White in 1979.

Sims and Detmer have set an ominous precedent for OU quarterback Jason White, the reigning Heisman winner who will return in 2004. Five players could keep White from becoming the first player to win back-to-back Heismans since Ohio State running back Archie Griffin in 1974-75:

1. QB Matt Leinart, Southern California. To think USC coach Pete Carroll said earlier this season that hotshot freshman quarterback John David Booty would have an opportunity to win the job next spring. Not a chance. Leinart put up better numbers than 2002 Heisman winner Carson Palmer, and Leinart will have a more productive season in 2004 after another summer of work under quarterbacks guru Norm Chow.

2. RB Darren Sproles, Kansas State. A big performance in the Big 12 title game elevated Sproles to fifth in the 2003 voting, but his 2004 candidacy is based on much more than a big performance in a big game. Sproles ran for 1,986 yards this season and 3,451 in the last two. He may need 2,000 to overtake White and Leinart, but at this point it's hard to doubt the 5-7, 170-pound scatback.

3. QB David Greene, Georgia. His numbers

through three years have been solid, he's 31-8 as a starter, and he's led the Bulldogs' turnaround under coach Mark Richt. But that's not enough. Greene has to have a career season with big numbers or he'll be just another Ken Dorsey—a guy with a sparkling record but vanilla numbers.

4. QB Chris Rix, Florida State. His hot-and-cold performances are as much about his erratic behavior off the field as they are about lazy mechanics that make his throws sail high. There's hope that a sense of urgency in his senior year will straighten out the kinks. If it does, Rix could have a monster season.

5. QB Brad Smith, Missouri. The Tigers have to get better defensively; Smith can't win every game by himself. But the talent in Columbia continues to increase—and so do the possibilities for a record-breaking season from the nation's best dual-threat quarterback. —M.H.

Back to work

What teams—and the BCS—do in the next several months will shape the 2004 season BY MATT HAYES

Matt Leinart was asked how Southern California, with a group of talented but inexperienced skill players, somehow developed into a national champion. The quarterback who has an answer for every problem on the field, pointed to success off it.

"We basically lived with each other during the summer," Leinart said.

In short, offseason preparation translates to success when it matters most.

As a new offseason begins, how six questions are answered will determine what happens in 2004.

1. How will the BCS be restructured?

The BCS conference commissioners aren't in complete agreement, but there likely will be one key change to the formula: A team will have to win its conference championship to be eligible for the BCS national title game.

Another change, though not as important, will be the addition of a fifth BCS game to give schools from non-BCS conferences greater access, both to the exposure and the dollars that BCS games provide. The fifth game will begin in 2006 and probably will pay about half of what the current BCS bowls pay. The non-BCS team with the best BCS number automatically will get a bid. Look for the Citrus, Cotton, Gator and Peach Bowls to vie for the game, but they won't be bidding for a spot in the rotation for the national title game. It will stay with the top four BCS bowls—Orange, Rose, Fiesta and Sugar.

2. Who will win the recruiting race?

There won't be many surprises. Texas, Oklahoma and USC again are primed to land big classes, and LSU and Florida are closing the gap.

Oklahoma is scrambling to keep quarterback Rhett Bomar, the nation's No. 1 player. Bomar committed to the Sooners early, but he since has said he may continue to take visits. The source of his vacillation: OU quarterback Jason White, who was awarded an extra year of eligibility by the NCAA. Bomar wanted to compete



Bomar

TOM HAUCK FOR TSN

for the starting job in 2004, but it now looks as though he would be competing with Paul Thompson and Tommy Grady for the No. 2 spot. Bomar had been recruiting for the Sooners, calling star players—most notably, Adrian Peterson, the nation's No. 1 tailback—and trying to get them to join him in Norman.

Linebacker Keith Rivers, the nation's top defensive recruit, likely will choose between USC and Florida and could start for either school.

3. How does Texas rebound after yet another embarrassing loss in a big game?

Developing mental toughness is coach Mack Brown's No. 1 goal. The Longhorns have as much talent as any team in the country, but it simply doesn't show on game day. Brown is too easy on his star players, at times coddling them and not holding them responsible for disappearing in critical situations. His player-friendly style is his hook in recruiting, but it's counterproductive once players arrive on campus.

Some teams use sports psychologists, others hire tough-guy assistant coaches to change certain styles and attitudes. Brown may try both, especially considering those 32 wins in the past three seasons don't mean as much now that Steve Spurrier is available.



Zwick

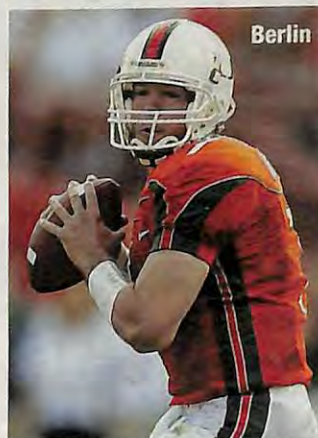
PAUL NISELY / TSN

4. Where are the best position battles this offseason?

In the Big Ten. Six of the league's eight bowl teams will be replacing senior quarterbacks. League favorites Michigan and Ohio State will start sophomores with little experience. Matt Gutierrez played sparingly this season

as John Navarre's backup and has struggled in picking up the offense. There's a possibility heralded incoming freshman Chad Henne could be a factor.

Ohio State will have to deal with the by-product of



Berlin

BOB LEVERONE / TSN

so many close games: Backup Justin Zwick threw a total of eight passes all season and has limited experience despite being in the system for two years. Still, the staff believes it can continue to build on the passing game because of Zwick's arm strength and accuracy.

5. What can Miami do to help quarterback Brock Berlin finally grow into his enormous hype?

Hurricanes offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski says Berlin didn't play as poorly as it looked this season. There were constant

breakdowns on the offensive line because the unit was reshuffled frequently because of injuries or ineffectiveness.

Chudzinski points to Berlin's solid play in Miami's Orange Bowl win over Florida State as the start of the reclamation project. The work will continue in spring practice and fall camp, where Miami will develop more shotgun sets to give Berlin a quick look at his reads. Miami's play-action offense of years past doesn't fit Berlin's catch-it-and-throw-it style because his back is to the defense for 2 or 3 seconds before he turns to read coverages. It also helps that coach Larry Coker says Berlin is the starter, ending any speculation of a quarterback controversy this summer.

6. What can Penn State do to return the upper echelon of the Big Ten?

Coach Joe Paterno will give coordinator Fran Ganter more freedom with the offense, and the Lions will develop more multiple formations this spring to help rebuild quarterback Zack Mills' confidence. There are many possibilities, including using sets similar to Northwestern's spread offense and the possibility of tailback Austin Scott and wide receiver-quarterback Michael Robinson—two of the league's best young players—in the same backfield.



Robinson

PAUL NISELY / TSN

E-mail senior writer Matt Hayes at mhayes@sportingnews.com.

Then there were eight

Now, let's bring out the rest of our Super Bowl hopefuls: the Eagles, Rams, Patriots and Chiefs. By virtue of securing the top two seeds in their conferences, those teams watched last weekend while the Titans, Panthers, Packers and Colts won wild-card games to continue in the postseason.

Indianapolis and Carolina won with flair. Tennessee and Green Bay won with drama. So what lies ahead?

The Titans, with quarterback Steve McNair limping because of ankle and calf problems and running back Eddie George having a separated shoulder, must venture to New England. Everyone is waiting to see what defensive plan Patriots mastermind Bill Belichick concocts to stop Tennessee.

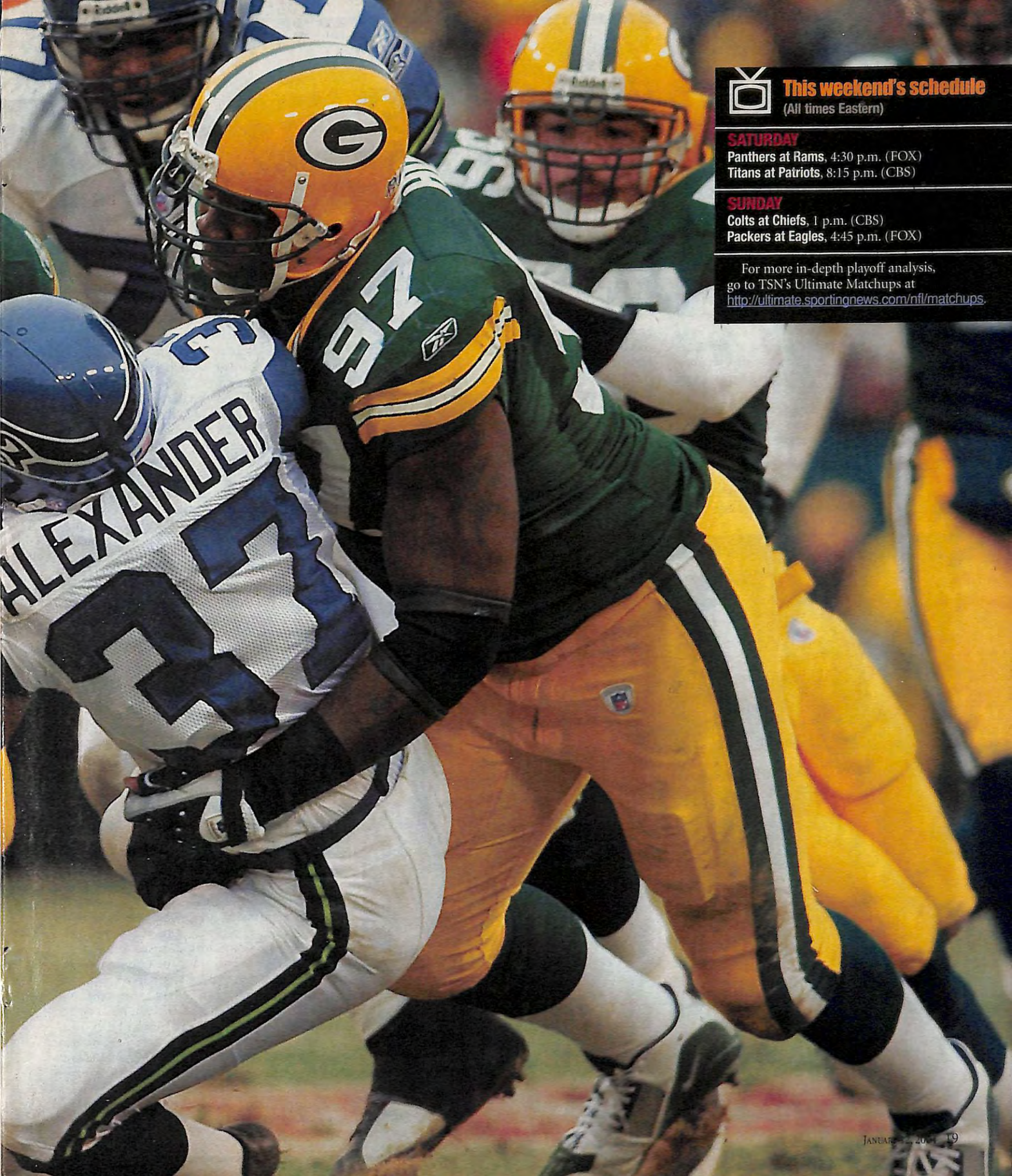
Colts quarterback Peyton Manning threw five touchdown passes and had a perfect passer rating against the Broncos. The Chiefs, whose defense has been a weak spot much of the season, are at home but face a severe challenge in trying to stop Indianapolis.

The NFC divisional games will have a bit of an "old home week" flavor. Panthers wide receiver Ricky Proehl returns to St. Louis, where his 30-yard TD reception in the NFC championship game four years ago lifted the Rams into Super Bowl 34. And cornerback Al Harris, whose 52-yard interception return gave the Packers an overtime triumph over Seattle, was a reserve cornerback with the Eagles for five years before becoming a starter in Green Bay this season.

For detailed analysis of this weekend's games, check out our divisional playoff previews on the following pages.

Photo by Dilip Vishwanat / TSN

The Packers' improved run defense, which put the squeeze on Seattle, will force the Eagles to try to win Sunday's game through the air.



This weekend's schedule

(All times Eastern)

SATURDAY

Panthers at Rams, 4:30 p.m. (FOX)

Titans at Patriots, 8:15 p.m. (CBS)

SUNDAY

Colts at Chiefs, 1 p.m. (CBS)

Packers at Eagles, 4:45 p.m. (FOX)

For more in-depth playoff analysis,
go to TSN's Ultimate Matchups at
<http://ultimate.sportingnews.com/nfl/matchups>.

Co-obstacles

To reach the AFC championship game, **NEW ENGLAND** and **KANSAS CITY** each must overcome one of the NFL's co-MVPs. Only one will. BY PAUL ATTNER

What a perfect way for these AFC playoffs to unfold. The teams with the conference's best records stand one game from a matchup that, based on recent history of home-field advantage in the divisional round, seems almost inevitable. But history doesn't always account for special obstacles. In this case, both the Patriots and Chiefs first must overcome one of the NFL's co-MVPs. New England will; Kansas City won't.

Indeed, the Chiefs' horrid defense faces its worst possible nightmare Sunday, a suddenly in-sync, Peyton Manning-led Colts offense that is capable of

running up all types of ridiculously impressive numbers, even in Arrowhead Stadium. Since the Colts' defense is maddeningly inconsistent, this could be one of those rare high-scoring postseason games that drive coaches insane. But at least Colts coach Tony Dungy will be able to force a smile when it's over.

The Patriots, though, will capitalize on a significant break. Three months ago, they held off the Titans, 38-30, in Foxboro despite giving up 411 total yards. But that was when Titans quarterback Steve McNair was at the peak of his splendid play this sea-

son, before leg injuries began eating into his consistency. McNair now is nowhere near the player he was October 5. That makes it all but impossible for the Titans to pull off a second upset Saturday, especially considering the sterling quality of play being produced by Patriots quarterback Tom Brady the last six games, during which he has completed 63 percent of his passes and thrown for 12 touchdowns and just four interceptions—none in the past four contests.

Manning against Brady is the best quarterback confrontation the NFL can produce in the playoffs, better than anything even the Super Bowl—and possibly Donovan McNabb—can duplicate. Because both players are peaking at the right time, their teams surely will wind up in the conference championship game. Which is fitting, considering that offense now dominates the league—and looking for pivotal players anymore on defense would be a waste of precious time.

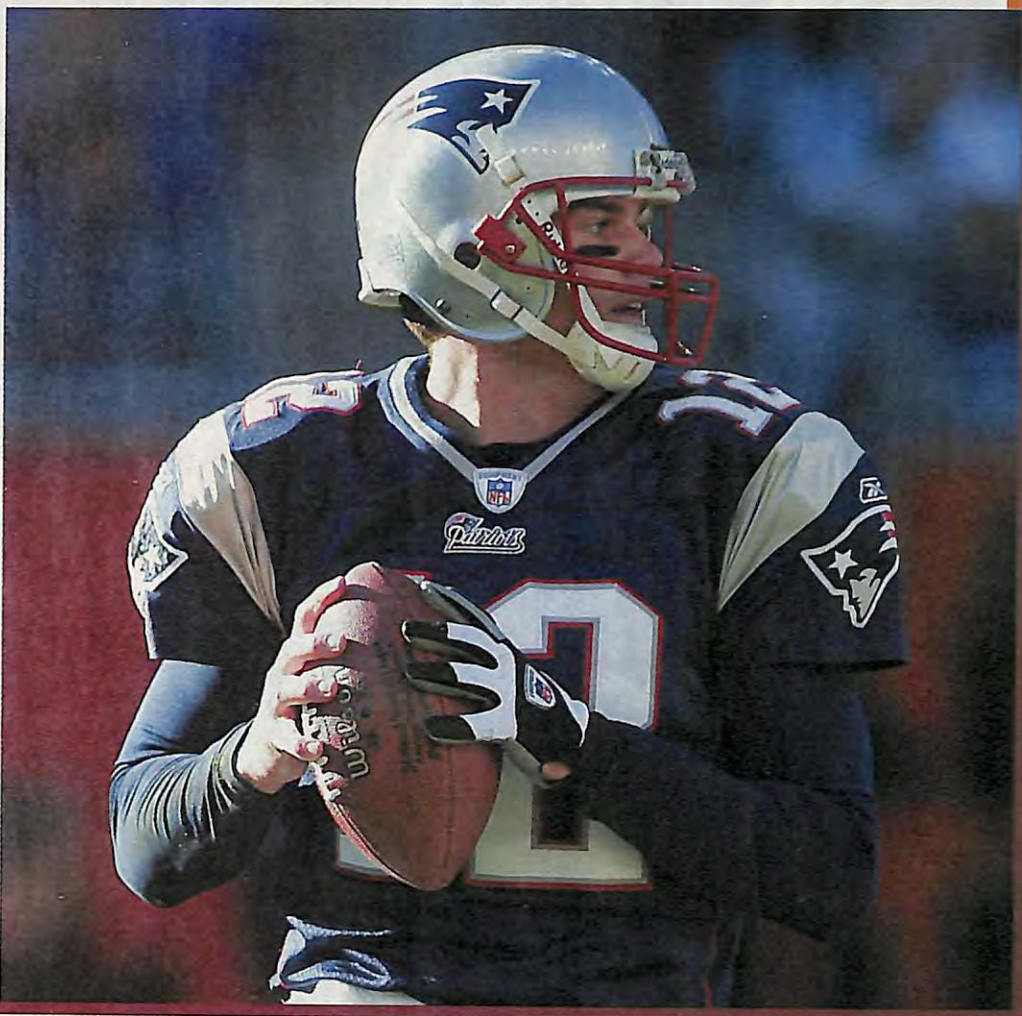
"I know it's a cliché, but these playoffs are all about the team that gets on an offensive roll, and that is what the Colts can throw at you," says ESPN analyst Joe Theismann. "The only way to beat them is to keep Peyton off the field, and the Chiefs are going to have a hard time doing that. They are not good enough defensively; you should be able to attack them."

Certainly, the Chiefs will get no pleasure from analyzing Manning's 41-10 humiliation of the Broncos, in which he recorded just the fourth perfect passer rating (158.3) in league playoff history, throwing for five touchdowns and 377 yards, all the while making it look as if he was partaking in a 7-on-7 intrasquad drill.

The Colts' offense is like a marching band, all glitter and loud sounds, with Manning the cerebral conductor, efficiently dissecting and embarrassing defenses. The Patriots are much more serene, a string quartet that quietly impresses you with the final results, not its individual parts. Brady is the offense's only real playmaker, an emerging soloist who has improved noticeably on his Super Bowl-winning season of two years ago. He is more confident now, more consistent, a perfect leader for a scheme that depends so heavily on mistake-free execution and decision-making to produce results.

McNair was better than both of them earlier, but now his accuracy is off just enough, his mobility hindered just enough, to leave him and the Titans vulnerable, something that was glaringly obvious in their final-minute, 20-17 victory over the Ravens. "Mac has to play better than that for them to go much further in the playoffs," said Ravens cornerback Corey Fuller after Baltimore intercepted three of McNair's passes.

New England's offense is scary only when it comes to Brady, who is playing better than he did when the Patriots won Super Bowl 36.



JOHN DUNN FOR ESPN

In October, the Titans had every reason to think they were on the verge of beating the Patriots. McNair had them moving toward a go-ahead touchdown in the final quarter and the Patriots' defense had shown little ability to stop him. But in what became a familiar pattern for New England all season, its defense produced a game-turning play, a 65-yard interception by cornerback Ty Law for a touchdown.

"Theirs is a defense where no one really jumps out at you," says Texans offensive coordinator Chris Palmer, whose team lost to the Patriots, 23-20, in overtime November 23. "But they find a way to make a play. It comes from being at the right place at the right time. They don't make a lot of mental errors and they aren't going to give you anything. You have to work for everything and you have to be patient, and you have to be willing to try to make plays. You just can't get frustrated and force things; they will eat that up."

The McNair of midseason made scads of plays downfield within the Titans' expanded vertical offense, the perfect antidote for those frequent times when the Patriots blitz, leaving Law and fellow corner Tyrone Poole in man coverage. But in the four games he has played (including the win over the Ravens) since he hurt his right calf November 23, McNair has thrown seven touchdowns and been intercepted six times—hardly MVP numbers. "He isn't making good decisions anymore," says one AFC personnel man. "He isn't leading his receivers the

way he was with his passes. He's not the same guy."

The margin to beat both Law and Poole is slight. Of all the New England defenders, Poole is perhaps the most pivotal. A well-traveled journeyman, his elevated play has given coach Bill Belichick the corner-back combination he needs to make the rest of his ever-changing scheming work. "He's been outstanding," says Texans G.M. Charley Casserly. "You think you can run by him and Law, but it just doesn't happen when you play them."

But because the Patriots are no powerhouse—in this era of the NFL, 14-2 records garner respect, not fear—expect this game to be ugly and close. Nothing either team does is very pretty or fluid, particularly New England on offense, where the Patriots don't run for many yards and rely almost exclusively on superior coaching and Brady's nifty accuracy to generate results. And both teams depend so much on turnovers; the Patriots are plus-17 and Tennessee is plus-13.

The Titans will attempt to help McNair by running as much as they can. Their ground game has improved the last three games, when they averaged 153 yards compared to their season mark of 101. But halfback Eddie George has a dislocated shoulder and even though he turned in a heroic performance against the Ravens, gaining 44 of his 88 yards after the injury, he obviously won't be at full strength for this one.

"I think Tennessee can beat New England," says Theismann. "They have playoff experience and

Even though George is hurting, the Titans will run as much as they can.



NICK WASS / AP

For the Chiefs to outscore the Colts, Holmes must help a methodical offense milk the game clock and keep Manning on the bench.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

When it comes to the Colts, it is prudent to be cautious. They are heartbreakers, pretty enough to be infatuating but immature enough on defense to be disappointing. This is a team absolutely dependent on Manning and his offense for success, and that is a precarious way to advance to the Super Bowl. "Their defense is mobile and they really can generate a pass rush," says Palmer. "If you can run on them, you can cause problems. But if you get behind, they can come at you with that rush and it becomes very difficult." This is a defense still being molded, a year or two away from elite status.

But unless they encounter a blinding snowstorm Sunday, the Colts are too talented and deep on offense to be controlled by the Chiefs. In a six-game stretch in which they went 3-3 after a 9-0 start, Kansas City gave up an average of 192 rushing yards, 413 total yards and 30 points. It didn't matter the opponent, whether it was Cincinnati (422 total yards), Denver (508) or even San Diego (370), the Chiefs were embarrassed. They are not strong enough physically to hold up against the the run, and they lack the secondary to control the pass. Now the league's No. 29 defense will encounter the fury of its No. 3 offense.

"Without a doubt, the Colts are good enough on offense to get to the Super Bowl," says ESPN.com analyst Randy Mueller. "Peyton is Peyton. He may not be as flashy as he has been, but he is just as efficient. And he will be playing a defense that has worn out. The Chiefs were living on turnovers, but now those have stopped and it has left them vulnerable."

NFL DIVISIONAL PLAYOFF PREVIEW

To win, the Chiefs, who have the NFL's No. 2 offense, must duplicate the Broncos' game plan against Indianapolis in Week 16, when Denver gained 465 yards, had the ball for 45 minutes and won, 31-17—not the Denver game plan last Sunday, which generated just 10 points amid the havoc wrought by Manning. Kansas City must use the running of Priest Holmes and become methodical in its offensive approach, chewing up time, getting accurate passing from Trent Green and leaving Manning fretting on the bench. The Broncos discovered painfully what happens when Manning is allowed to get into a rhythm. He completed 11 of 12 passes for 191 yards and three touchdowns in leading the Colts to a 21-3 lead in the second quarter and failed to complete just two of 18 passes in the first half.

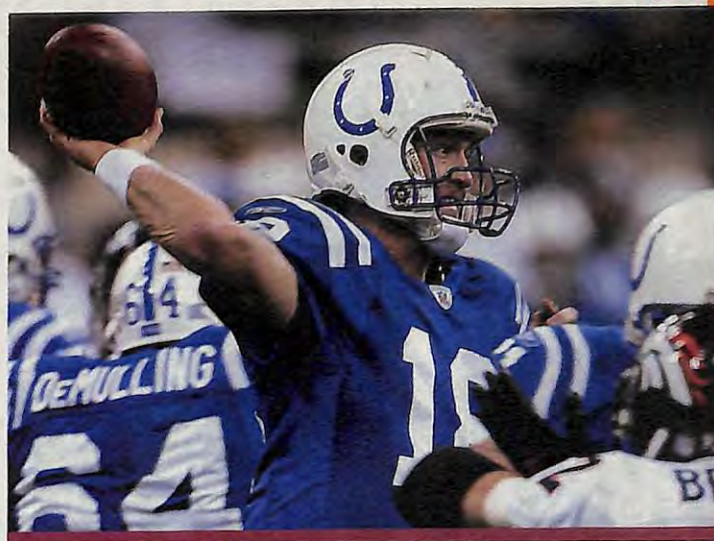
"The Chiefs don't have a chance," says Broncos defensive end Bertrand Berry. "They can't stop the run, and in the playoffs you have to stop the run. Indy has a better defense, a better team and a better chance."

The Colts did a magnificent job of figuring out how to negate what had been a splendid defensive effort by the Broncos in the first meeting. Instead of using three-wide receiver sets and doing a lot of audibling, they stayed with two tight ends and the called play to better protect Manning, who had been harassed by blitzes from the Broncos' secondary. He

hardly was touched in this one, and with ample time he simply shredded Denver. Now he finally has his first playoff win. He celebrated with a shrimp cocktail and big steak Sunday night, then began preparations for the Chiefs.

Of course, the Colts, who are 7-1 on the road this season, did their work in the sterile, quick environment of the RCA Dome. They won't be quite as quick outside at Arrowhead, where the Chiefs have not allowed more than 24 points in a game during their current 13-game home winning streak and have outscored opponents by an average of 34-15.7 this season. But the Colts have won their last four games in Arrowhead. Besides, this is Manning's time, and that will be enough to end coach Dick Vermeil's quest for a third Super Bowl appearance. "When the Colts play like they can,"

Manning destroyed the Broncos. Imagine what he'll do against the Chiefs' 29th-ranked defense.



MICHAEL CONROY / AP

says Theismann, "you just don't want to be on the other side." **TSN**

E-mail senior writer Paul Attner at pattner@sportingnews.com.

AFC divisional playoff matchups

The War Room offers its unique take on this week's AFC playoff matchups. For in-depth analysis, subscribe to TSN's Ultimate Matchups at <http://ultimate.sportingnews.com/nfl/matchups>.

Tennessee at New England

When Tennessee has the ball: Since the healthy return of NT Ted Washington, the Patriots have gotten stronger against the run each week. His presence in the middle, combined with the explosiveness of RE Richard Seymour in the team's three-man front, allows the linebackers to get free lanes to the ballcarrier. As a result, Eddie George, who played despite separating a shoulder last week, will struggle to run effectively. That means QB Steve McNair must play better, but his receivers don't match up well against the Patriots' secondary. CB Ty Law will take the Titans' No. 2 receiver out of the game in man coverage, allowing the secondary to gang up on WR Derrick Mason and freeing the Patriots' linebackers and safeties to be more active and versatile in coverage down the middle.

When New England has the ball: The Patriots might as well throw the running attack out of their game plan. The Titans' run defense shut down RB Jamal Lewis last week and ranks No. 1 overall in the NFL, thanks to its speed on the perimeter with players such as DEs Jevon Kearse and Kevin Carter and WLB Keith Bulluck. Instead, look for the Patriots to target SS Tank Williams by sending emerging TE Daniel Graham down the middle. They also figure to go back and forth between three-receiver sets with Troy Brown, Deion Branch and Bethel Johnson or David Givens and some two-tight end sets with Graham and Christian Fauria to test the depth and coverage skills of Tennessee's secondary.

Bottom line: McNair will have a hard time improving upon his poor performance of last week. The defensive schemes created by Patriots coach Bill Belichick and coordinator Romeo Crennel should result in a couple of game-breaking takeaways by New England. **Pick: Patriots 23, Titans 16.**



Indianapolis at Kansas City

When Indianapolis has the ball: Kansas City hopes the return of MLB Mike Maslowski (knee) after missing six games will shore up a woeful run defense that has been hurt by defenders overrunning holes and tackling poorly. Indianapolis will test Kansas City's discipline with some stretch plays that allow RB Edgerrin James to read his blocks and then pick a hole. A loud Arrowhead Stadium crowd will make it difficult for QB Peyton Manning to call audibles, especially if the Colts fall behind early. To avoid that, the Colts should take some early chances downfield, especially off play-action. If the Chiefs overload Marvin Harrison's side of the field, Manning should look for WRs Reggie Wayne and Brandon Stokley.

When Kansas City has the ball: The Chiefs must focus on running right at Indianapolis. The Colts' swift defensive ends can fly upfield and make it difficult for RB Priest Holmes to get outside, but the front seven lacks bulk. Kansas City's line is known for pulling a guard or center, allowing Holmes to run wide or pick a hole and cut inside. But Holmes is an effective between-the-tackles runner, too. QB Trent

Green must recognize when the Colts' safeties creep up to the line, then look for TE Tony Gonzalez downfield. Kansas City would be wise to run some pass plays on first and second down to keep the Colts' pass rush off-balance and the safeties honest.

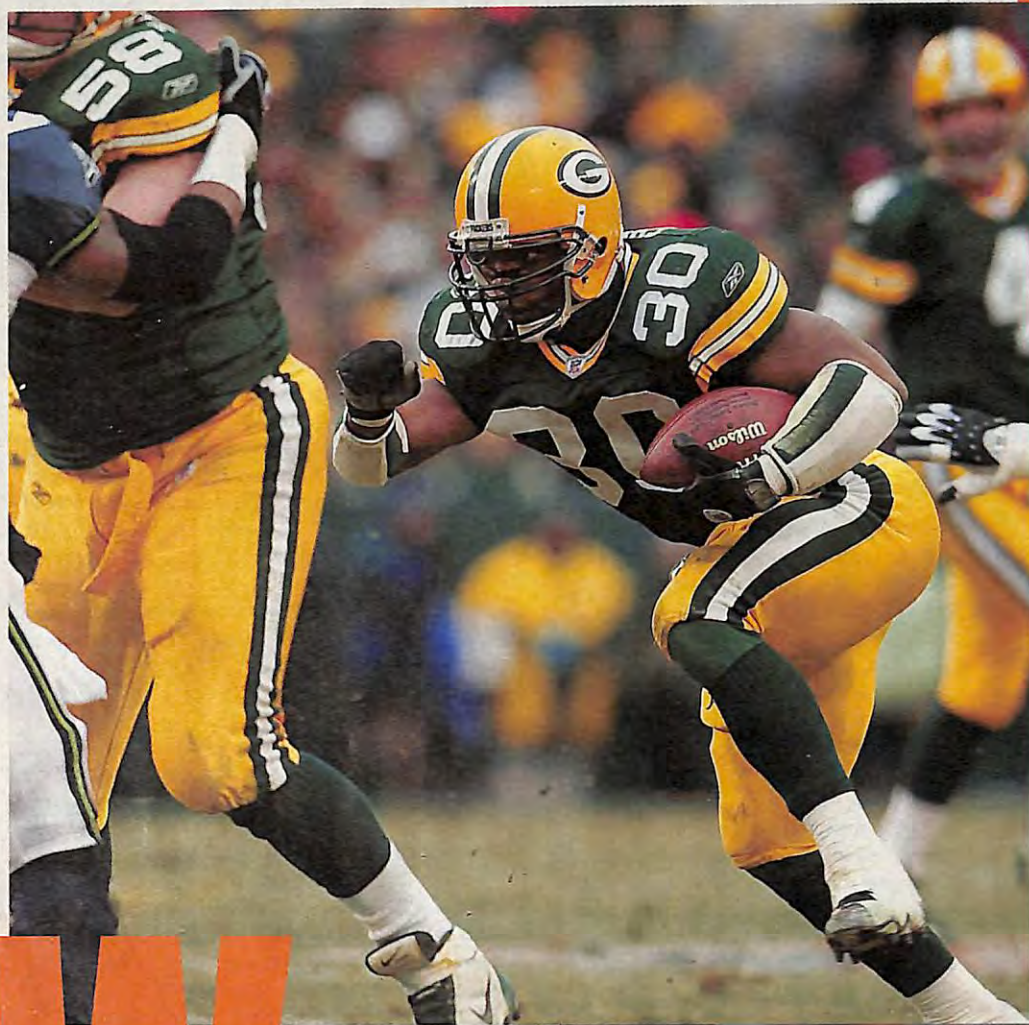
Bottom line: Green will make some big plays downfield and Holmes will get his yards, but the Colts can outscore a team that has surrendered 45 points in two of its last four games. Indianapolis will establish an effective running game that will allow Manning to spread the ball around to his many weapons and control the tempo. **Pick: Colts 38, Chiefs 28.**

For the **PACKERS** and **PANTHERS** to beat the **EAGLES** and **RAMS**—and survive another week in the playoffs—they'll first have to survive

A blizzard of blitzes

BY DAN POMPEI

Because of a game-winning TD by Harris (31) that was set up by a 'population blitz,' Green and the Packers' offense will get a chance to attack the Eagles' vaunted blitz package.



With their season on the line, the Packers overloaded the line. On third-and-11 in overtime, the Seahawks lined up in a four-wide receiver set. Packers defensive coordinator Ed Donatell responded with a "population blitz" in which linebackers Nick Barnett and Hannibal Navies and safeties Darren Sharper and Marques Anderson went after Seahawks quarterback Matt Hasselbeck. Hasselbeck recognized it and audibled to a three-step drop and quick pass, then hurried his throw to receiver Alex Bannister. Cornerback Al Harris sat on the route and shot in front of Bannister for an interception and ran 52 yards for the touchdown that gave the



Packers a 33-27 victory.

You would have had a hard time convincing many in the Lambeau Field crowd that Irvin Favre wasn't blitzing as well. As the music blared and Brett Favre ran around the field with his hands over his head and Packer World reveled, more than a few thoughts in the stadium drifted to Irvin Favre, Brett's father, who suffered a fatal stroke while driving his car two weeks earlier.

There was much talk in Wisconsin about destiny and divine intervention. You could catch Favre stealing an occasional glance up at the skybox where Irvin used to sit and watch him play. A few of Favre's passes seemed to be blown by a kind wind, as if Green Bay had never known one of those before. "I thought Favre had one of the best games he's had, especially since I've been here," Packers coach Mike Sherman said after Favre passed for 319 yards and a touchdown, completing 26 of 38 attempts. "I thought what he did out there was phenomenal."

There is no doubt the spirit of Irvin Favre is shaping the NFC playoffs. And there is no doubt the blitz is doing the same.

Favre and Panthers quarterback Jake Delhomme, who won their wild-card games in their home stadiums last weekend, will be exposed to drastically different environments this weekend—Favre in Philadelphia and Delhomme in St. Louis. But both are preparing for a blizzard of blitzes.

The Rams quietly have become one of the NFL's most effective blitzing teams. The blitz combined with the cover 2 has been defensive coordinator Lovie Smith's signature on the Rams, and it should result in Smith becoming a head coach in the next few weeks.

About midway through the season, Rams coach Mike Martz and Smith got together and decided to try a defensive approach that would be a philosophical match for Martz's aggressive offense. After blitzing an average of 8.2 times per game in the first seven games of the season, the Rams blitzed 11.3 times per game in their last nine games, according to STATS Inc.

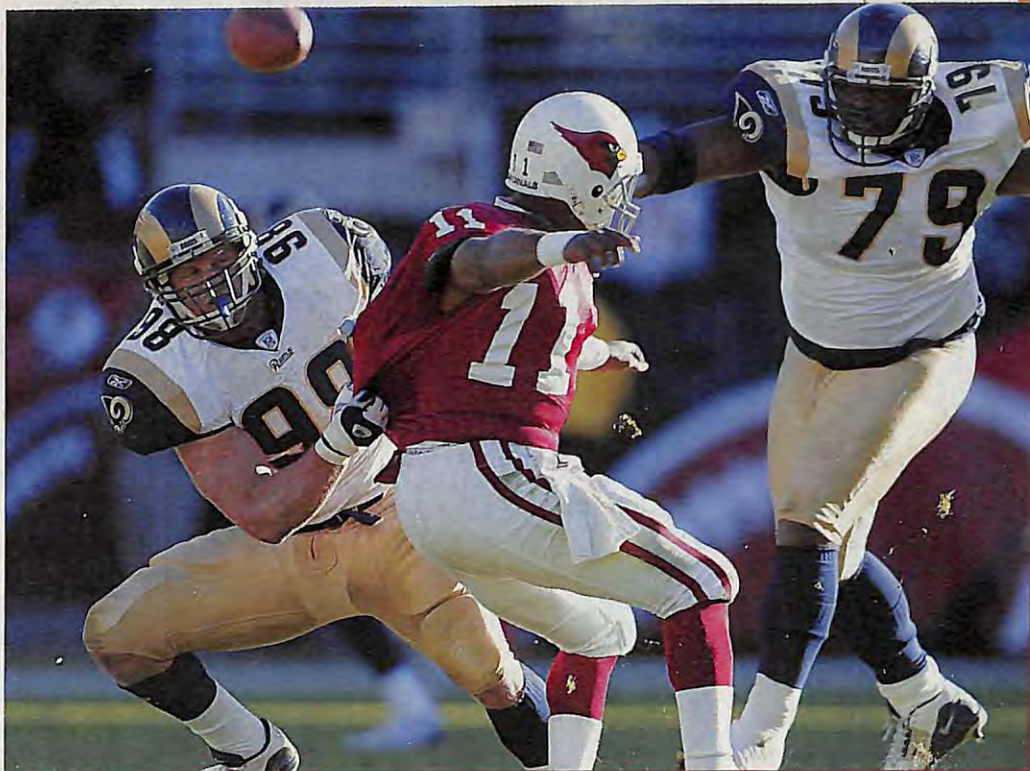
The beauty of the Rams' defensive personnel is the team doesn't need to blitz to get pressure. When Grant Wistrom, Brian Young, Tyoka Jackson and Leonard Little focus on bringing down a quarterback, they often can do it by themselves. When the Rams bring extra men, the pass rush can be overwhelming. The Bengals, for instance, threw up their hands and tried to run in passing situations rather

DILIP VISHWANATH / TSN

DARREN HAUCK / AP

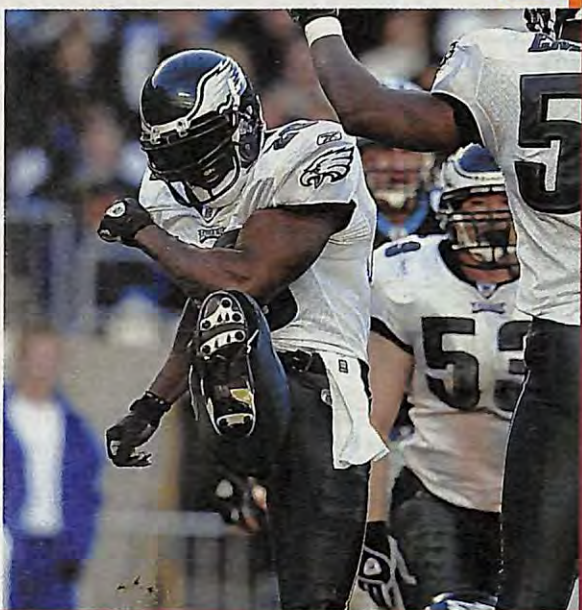
NFL DIVISIONAL PLAYOFF PREVIEW

The Rams get an effective pass rush from players such as Wistrom (98) and Pickett up front, but it's blitz packages that make St. Louis' defense dangerous.



DUP VISHWANATH / TSN

Dawkins supplies the heat for the Eagles' defense from his free safety position.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

oven and various pieces of Tupperware.

With speed and instinct, Adam Archuleta has been a terrific blitzing weapon, either from his strong safety position or from middle linebacker, which he plays in the Rams' unusual 4-1-6 alignment. The Rams' young, fleet group of linebackers also has helped achieve the goal of getting to the passer.

When the Rams have blitzed, they have come up with 16 sacks and 10 interceptions. Opposing quarterbacks had a 60.19 passer rating against the Rams' blitzes, which was the second-lowest passer rating against the blitz in the NFL. The blitz is a significant reason why the Rams ranked second in the NFL in interception percentage. "When the Rams have gotten interceptions, it's because they've gotten a lot of pressure up front," 49ers coach Dennis Erickson says.

Delhomme should be accustomed to the blitz after seeing quite a few blitzes in the Panthers' 29-10 victory over the Cowboys. He handled the pressure calmly and effectively, more like a graybeard than a first-year starter. Several of the Panthers' most significant plays came on Dallas blitzes with man-to-man coverage, including Delhomme's 32-yard touchdown pass to Steve Smith in the third quarter that put the game out of reach.

The Rams' pass rush will be enhanced by the

crowd noise in the Edward Jones Dome because the Panthers' offensive linemen will have difficulty hearing the snap count. The Panthers know all about a home-field advantage. Last Saturday, the normally laid-back Ericsson Stadium crowd acted more like a gang of Dukies. Most of the fans spent the game on their feet, and the stadium seemed to pulsate as giveaway white towels were waved incessantly throughout the game.

The Panthers returned the love, first with a near-flawless performance—they had no penalties or turnovers, which happened only once before in NFL postseason history—and then with a more personal touch.

After going into the locker room when the game ended, the Panthers came back out for a victory lap, high-fiving fans and jumping—or in the case of receiver Muhsin Muhammad, climbing—into the crowd. Shirtless cornerback Ricky Manning grabbed an NFC South championship banner from a flag boy and ran the field. The crowd's enthusiasm for Delhomme was hardly controllable, as the quarterback was hugged and slapped on the back. "Jake kind of worried me," tackle Todd Steussie told the *Charlotte Observer*. "He was hit harder out there than he was by the Cowboys."

Cowboys coach Bill Parcells watched much of the fourth quarter appearing more sad than mad, but at least he could take solace in the knowledge that he tried to sign Delhomme in the offseason when the quarterback was a free agent.

The Panthers have handled pressure pretty well all season, mostly by running Stephen Davis and not passing much. But if the Rams can take a lead on the Panthers—and they will—Delhomme will be forced to put it up. That's when you can expect the Rams to make the big plays that will win the game. "Delhomme has really come a ways," one head coach says. "But he can be exposed. He will put them up, and you can pick him off."

Favre had 21 interceptions this season—more than all but two quarterbacks—but it wasn't because the blitz got to him. The Packers have offset the blitz by moving Favre around and giving him different launch points.

Favre's career has been defined by passes he should not have thrown. Some have lost him games; some have won him MVP awards. This year, his interceptions total skewed high in part because he played nine regular-season games with a splint on his fractured thumb. Favre was considering ditching the splint for the playoffs, but decided against it while watching TV in his hotel room the night before the game. He has become accustomed to it by now, and the injury obviously is not bothering him as much as it was earlier in the season.

That splint appeared to affect Favre's throws in a 17-14 Eagles victory over the Packers on November 10 at Lambeau Field. The Eagles probably will blitz Favre more Sunday than they did in that game, when they were without free safety Brian Dawkins and cornerback Bobby Taylor. Dawkins is one of the Eagles' primary blitzers, so defensive coordinator Jim Johnson had taken some of Dawkins' zone blitzes out of the Eagles' game plans and cut back on

than attempt to throw into the blitz in Week 16.

On passing downs Saturday, the Rams will be coming at Delhomme with more than five players. If they're not bringing the kitchen sink, they will be bringing the dishwasher, the refrigerator/freezer, the

Smith and the Panthers took advantage when Dallas blitzed.



MARK HUMPHREY / AP

their frequency of blitzing. Since both players have returned, the Eagles have picked up their blitzing pace. They finished the regular season with 194 blitzes, fifth highest in the NFL.

"Jimmy is going to come after them with different blitzes," Erickson says. "They'll make the big play on defense. They may give up a play, but they're going to knock that ball out. That's kind of their style of defense."

The big play is great, but against the Packers the Eagles had better make the little ones. The Eagles allowed seven backs to rush for 100 yards in their last 10 games.

The Packers' Ahman Green combines vision, burst, power and patience as well as any back in the NFL. He is set up by the best offensive line in the NFC. This is how good the Packers' offensive line is: Three Green Bay runners averaged at least 5.0 yards per carry this season.

If the Eagles hit the wrong gaps with their run blitzes, Green will be halfway to Atlantic City by the time they know what hit them. Long runs have been a problem for Philadelphia. "Some of it is because they do the zone dogs and blitzes," former Giants coach Jim Fassel says. "If you pick it up, you're in great shape. If you don't pick it up, you're hurting."

Harris, who came to the Packers in an offseason trade with the Eagles, says Johnson's philosophy is to

have all 11 defenders concentrate on stopping the quarterback. That would explain why Green ripped the Eagles for 192 yards, including a 45-yard touchdown run on fourth-and-1 in the fourth quarter in which the Packers caught linebackers Nate Wayne and Mark Simoneau in the wrong gaps. "I know exactly how they are looking at our quarterback," Harris says. "This is a plus for us. We have a great running back, good receivers and a great quarterback, but I know they are looking at it like 11-on-1."

Eagles coach Andy Reid points out that the Eagles' run defense has made the big plays when it has needed to. "This," Reid says, "is Jim's best job of coaching—a fabulous job."

Green and the Packers, then, should present Johnson with his most daunting challenge to date. Favre is not ready for his season to end in Philadelphia, and as long as the Packers continue to get the breaks they've been getting, it won't.

"I don't know what is going to happen, but the way this team has played up to this point and practiced, I would love to win the Super Bowl," Favre says. "If not, it's been fun. The way we're going right now, anything can happen."

TSN

TSN correspondents Mike Mulligan and Pat Yasinskas contributed to this story. E-mail senior writer Dan Pompei at dpompei@sportingnews.com.

NFC divisional playoff matchups

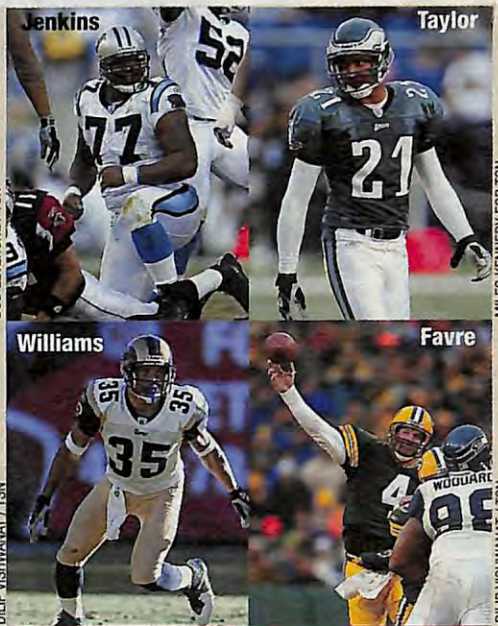
The War Room offers its unique take on this week's NFC playoff matchups. For in-depth analysis, subscribe to TSN's Ultimate Matchups at <http://ultimate.sportingnews.com/nfl/matchups>.

Carolina at St. Louis

When Carolina has the ball: The Rams' front seven has great speed and swarms to the ball, but it doesn't have great bulk in the middle. That's the area the Panthers will attack with RB Stephen Davis. St. Louis likely will counter by moving SS Adam Archuleta into the box, creating some favorable single-coverage matchups for QB Jake Delhomme to exploit. Though Delhomme will need to take some chances downfield to keep the Rams honest when this happens, he must be aware of FS Aeneas Williams at all times. Williams excels at reading the eyes of quarterbacks and has the range to make a big play.

When St. Louis has the ball: The Panthers don't have the depth in the secondary to match up with the Rams' multiple-receiver sets. St. Louis will try to take advantage by spreading the field and taking some chances downfield early in an effort to jump out to a lead that forces Carolina to abandon its running game. However, QB Marc Bulger can't get caught up in the emotion of his first playoff start and force the ball downfield to WRs Torry Holt and Isaac Bruce when they aren't open. It won't be easy for Marshall Faulk to run against DT Kris Jenkins and Carolina's outstanding defensive line, but if he can get wide, the Rams' receivers can help create excellent running lanes for him.

Bottom line: The Rams' talented though inconsistent offensive line should offer ample pass protection at home, which will make a world of difference for Bulger. Look for the Rams to take an early lead that limits Davis' carries and forces Delhomme to try to win the game with his arm. A couple of critical turnovers are more likely. **Pick: Rams 31, Panthers 17.**



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

DILIP VISHWANATH / TSN

MILES KENNEDY FOR TSN

DILIP VISHWANATH / TSN

Green Bay at Philadelphia

When Green Bay has the ball: Largely because of injuries up front, the Eagles have been miserable against the run much of the second half of the season. Look for the Packers to try to wear down the line with Ahman Green and the running game. The Packers should be able to generate some long drives on the ground, but passing yardage will be harder to come by. Because Eagles CBs Troy Vincent, Bobby Taylor and Lito Sheppard match up very well in man coverage against Packers WRs Robert Ferguson, Donald Driver and Javon Walker, the Eagles' safeties will be able to crowd the line and coordinator Jim Johnson can be as aggressive as he likes with blitzes. That consistent pressure should lead to a mistake or two by QB Brett Favre.

When Philadelphia has the ball: The Packers' biggest weakness the first half of the season—stopping the run—has become a strength, so the Eagles will win or lose this game in the air. Even without Brian Westbrook, the Eagles figure to use backs Duce Staley and Correll Buckhalter more as receivers than runners. Look for QB Donovan McNabb to distribute the ball

from a multitude of three-receiver, one-back, one-tight end sets. The Packers play a lot of man-to-man coverage, which forces their back seven to frequently turn and run with their backs to the line of scrimmage. As a result, McNabb should eat up chunks of yardage on the ground.

Bottom line: McNabb should be the story of this game. His ability to run and spread the ball around the field will allow him to outduel Favre and lead the Eagles to their third consecutive trip to the NFC championship game. **Pick: Eagles 26, Packers 24.**

The MAILMAN

GEORGE BODENHEIMER, a quiet innovator who rose from the mailroom to president of ESPN, gets our stamp as the most powerful man in sports BY STUART MILLER

A wide shot: elegant Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center in Manhattan. Advertising big shots, journalists and guest panelists such as NBA legend Bill Russell arrive for the third annual ESPN up-front presentation, at which the network celebrates with, and sells itself to, media buyers and opinion makers.

Zoom in: downstairs, into the greenroom, behind that closed door. There, in a restroom, John Saunders, Bob Ley and Chris Berman chat, talk sports and briefly relax. Most ESPN viewers—and aren't we all, at some point, ESPN viewers?—would love to eavesdrop here. But for anyone interested in truly understanding ESPN, the most compelling conversation in the building is back in the greenroom. Scan past Charlotte Bobcats owner Robert Johnson and advertising guru Dan Weiden to those chairs against the wall where a man discusses *sotto voce* the future of television with Stephen Burke, president of Comcast, the leading cable operator in the country.

Meet ESPN president George Bodenheimer, the most powerful person in the room, the building and, by the SPORTING NEWS' measure, in all of sports for 2003: No. 1 in the Power 100, our annual ranking of sports industry heavyweights.

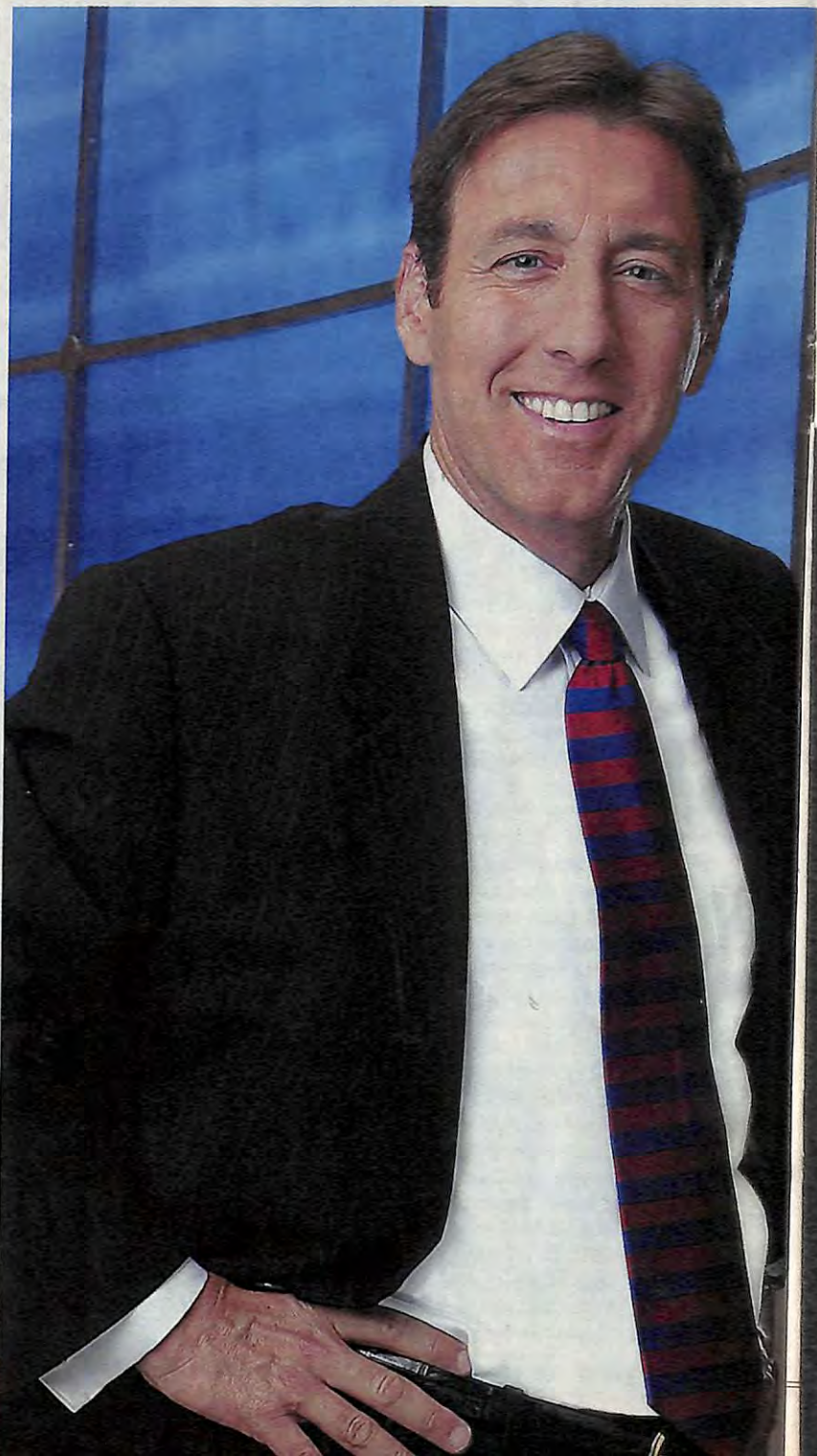
Unlike a certain other George whom TSN ranked *numero uno* last year, Bodenheimer doesn't constantly remind you that he's the boss. In fact, his power style is the polar opposite of George Steinbrenner's. Bodenheimer,

who was ranked fourth last year, doesn't dominate a room—he can be so soft-spoken that his conversations can't be heard 2 feet away. Ask ESPN senior vice president for consumer communication Chris LaPlaca for a Bodenheimer press kit, and he'll confess that there isn't one because Bodenheimer is oft-quoted on business matters but rarely profiled. Spend an hour in Bodenheimer's modestly decorated office, and he'll flood you with quotes reflecting an unstinting “we, not me” attitude.

But don't underestimate Bodenheimer, who started at ESPN in 1981 by driving mail around the Bristol, Conn., complex and picking up tapes and talent at the airport. Beneath his nice-guy smile and sense of humor, says senior vice president John Walsh, is someone “who can be demanding and make tough decisions, someone who understands that everything doesn't go the way you hoped it would.” He is, senior V.P. Lee Ann Daly says, extremely thorough, doesn't assume he knows everything and never leaves a meeting until he “understands it all.”

Says NBA commissioner David Stern, himself a former No. 1 in the Power 100: “He's a good manager who understands the evolution and history of his company as well as any CEO in the country.”

Bodenheimer, who took that first job in Bristol after being rejected by every major league baseball team and Madison Square Garden, got promoted to affiliate sales when he was the only staffer willing to move to



delivers



Texas. He moved up the ESPN ladder, adding affiliate marketing and then all sales and marketing before becoming president in 1998.

Bodenheimer's low-profile style has worked well, as has his push to make sure ESPN is an innovative risk taker both on screen and off. "He respects the traditions of ESPN but is fearless about moving forward, which he has made a mandate of his regime," says Walsh.

Bodenheimer's relentless multiplatform brand-building has made ESPN the lifeline of the American sports fan more than ever, reportedly reaching 90 million fans a week. Bodenheimer gained our top spot by continually extending ESPN's reach in ways large and small.

"George has coalesced his power," says Marc Ganis, president of the consulting firm Sports Corp., "and he has growing influence within the TV—and especially the cable—world."

In October 2002, ESPN became the first network with simultaneous contracts to televise all four major professional sports: the NBA, NHL, NFL and major league baseball. From August to March, its programming schedule is dotted with major-college football and basketball. In 2003, it added Wimbledon tennis, doubled its coverage of the NCAA women's basketball tournament and returned to televising baseball's playoffs. ESPN's original programming continues to develop, ranging from the controversial NFL-based drama *Playmakers* (more on that later) to ESPN2's new morning show, *Cold Pizza*.

ESPN scored its most-viewed quarter in network history from July to September, followed by single-month ratings records in October for both ESPN and ESPN2. (The ratings

boost was aided by outside factors—Boston and Chicago in baseball's playoffs and the LeBron James circus—that may not be replicated next year.) In November, a Cowboys-Patriots Sunday night game drew the third-biggest ESPN audience ever and the fifth-biggest in basic-cable history. ESPN won nine sports Emmys in 2003, its most since 1996. *ESPN: The Magazine* is approaching 2 million circulation and won a National Magazine Award for General Excellence. ESPN.com keeps breaking its own records as the Internet's most-trafficked sports website, scoring 16.7 million unique users in October.

But Bodenheimer's dynamic business plan manifests itself in many ways that are less obvious. "Technological excellence and leadership are as important to the future growth of ESPN and our brand as the product we put on the air," he says. In 2003, the company introduced ESPN Pay-Per-View; ESPN Motion, a newly enhanced video technology

now employed on its website, and ESPN HD, a 24/7 high-definition simulcast service that industry insiders credit with helping jump-start sluggish HDTV sales.

ESPN also is increasingly ambitious about maximizing its licensing potential, hoping to double retail sales by adding staff and moving beyond the typical hawking of T-shirts and caps. The past year witnessed the birth of ESPN DVDs, ESPN Golf Schools, X Games Skateparks and ESPN Videogames.

But wait, there's more ... Bodenheimer was promoted in 2003 to the head of ABC Sports. He now oversees *Monday Night Football*, coverage of The NBA Finals and, between ESPN and ABC, the TV

Past Power 1s

1990

Laurence Tisch,
Chairman, CBS

1991

David Stern,
Commissioner, NBA

1992

Phil Knight, CEO, Nike

1993

Ted Turner, Chairman,
Turner Broadcasting
Systems

1994

Rupert Murdoch,
Chairman, News Corp.

1995

Rupert Murdoch,
Chairman, News Corp.

1996

Dick Ebersol,
President, NBC Sports

1997

Michael Jordan,
NBA player

1998

Rupert Murdoch,
Chairman, News Corp.

1999

Chase Carey, Chairman
and CEO, FOX Television;
David Hill, Chairman and
CEO, FOX Sports
Television; and Rupert
Murdoch, CEO, News
Corp.

2000

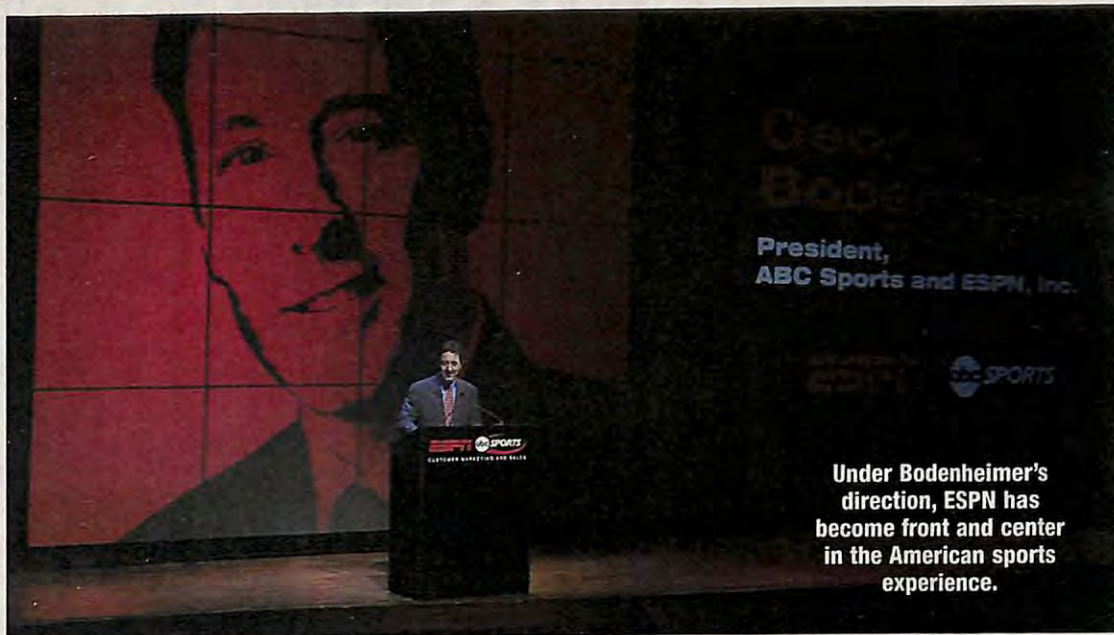
Tiger Woods, Golfer

2001

Paul Tagliabue,
Commissioner, NFL

2002

George Steinbrenner,
Owner, New York
Yankees



M. DAVID LEEDS FOR TSN

rights to virtually every college football bowl game.

With that kind of power, of course, comes great headaches. "The power opens doors, but it raises the bar," Bodenheimer says. "People don't expect you to stumble."

And yet one key to Bodenheimer's success is being adept at recovering from stumbles. (A notable exception was ESPN's hiring radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh, who was "unhired" after his racially charged comments about Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb; the Limbaugh saga was misplayed from start to finish.)

When ESPN's ratings declined sharply two years ago, Bodenheimer expanded into original programming such as the talk show *Pardon the Interruption* and the made-for-TV movie *The Junction Boys* to right the ship.

ABC's rookie NBA telecasts were poorly rated and widely considered inferior to the production by NBC; the previous over-the-air rights holder, so Bodenheimer signed the esteemed Mike Pearl away from Turner Sports to run the show. When Turner outwooded ABC for ex-coach/analyst Doug Collins, Bodenheimer and Pearl persuaded superstar Al Michaels to add the NBA to his regular duties on *Monday Night Football*. Stern is "very pleased" with the way Bodenheimer navigated the bumpy road. "George's approach is

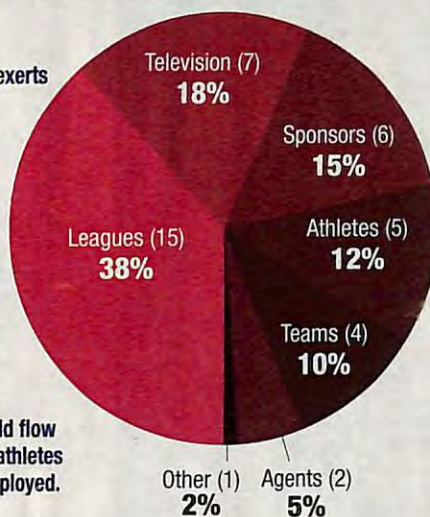
Power parsed

Though George Bodenheimer exerts his power across several media platforms at ESPN, television is his most visible power venue. Still, when you break down the top 40 in this year's Power 100 along general facets of sports, you'll see it is the leagues, conferences, associations and governing bodies that wield the most power. Translated: If there were no sports to televise, then sports TV would have no power, sponsors' marketing money would flow elsewhere, and teams, coaches, athletes and agents would be, well, unemployed.

very calm and considered," Stern says. "He is not given to knee-jerk reactions, but over time he makes a decision and makes it happen."

Bodenheimer must decide soon about the NHL. Commissioner Gary Bettman predicted the league's upcoming TV contract again will net \$600 million, but Bodenheimer insists he won't overspend just to keep all four leagues on his menu. "That (large rights fee) happened because the moon and stars all aligned," he says. "We don't need hockey. Our brand is big enough to carry the company forward with an evolving mix of products."

Perception-wise, Bodenheimer's



handling of *Playmakers*, whose plot lines infuriated the NFL and prompted Gatorade to pull its ads, is an even bigger power play. Bodenheimer didn't back down during the show's run but is biding his time on its future, acknowledging that he may have to capitulate to sports' most powerful league. "I listen to everyone's point of view," he says. "The show was a flat-out hit, and there's no evidence that it hurt NFL ratings. But I must not only respect their opinion. I must take it into account. They're my partner." (Meantime, be forewarned, commissioner Stern: He has Spike Lee developing a dramatic basketball series.)

But the gravest challenge to Bodenheimer's power comes off screen, where a lengthy, ongoing and unsettled battle with cable operators over fees they pay per subscriber to ESPN has reached a fever pitch.

Several operators, including Comcast and particularly Cox, have become outspoken about rejecting ESPN's rate hikes. Cox's ESPN deal expires in March, and the company is threatening to drop ESPN or move it to a premium sports tier that viewers pay for separately. But ESPN likely would recapture many Cox subscribers via satellite providers such as DirecTV.

Even Comcast's Burke acknowledged at ESPN's up-front presentation that "no programming is more important" than sports, and Comcast doesn't want to lose viewers to satellite providers. Bodenheimer is frustrated by Cox executives' media maneuvering and has begun characteristically returning fire. "Cox has chosen to make this a public negotiation," says Bodenheimer, asserting that there's room for compromise on price increases but that he won't allow ESPN to be shifted to a premium tier. ESPN needs cable companies' fees and the ad revenue from being on basic cable to afford the leagues' rights fees, and ESPN's deals with the NHL, NFL and MLB are, like the operators' contracts, expiring in the next two years. If Cox goes over the brink, Bodenheimer says, then he will, too. "I hope to work something out. But for the future of our business, we must remain part of basic cable."

The far-reaching effects of the subscriber-fees disagreement notwithstanding, that future looks bright. In 2004, the company will tap the Latino market with ESPN Deportes, a 24-hour Spanish-language network. ESPN will celebrate its 25th anniversary with a massive "Season of the Fan" marketing campaign and 35 hours of original programming. And if there's anyone who has the juice to juggle all those ESPN and ABC balls while getting his executives to take chances and while resolving sticky issues, it is George Bodenheimer. **TSN**

Stuart Miller, who ranks the Power 100, is a free-lance writer based in New York.

**WITHOUT
SPORTS,
HE'D
STILL BE
NUMBER
ONE**

CONGRATULATIONS, GEORGE

ESPN

THE POWER 100

Nos. 2-10



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

2 Paul Tagliabue (2002: 2), *Commissioner, NFL*. Revenue is up, TV ratings are strong and the NFL Network is launched. IBM and FedEx signed on as sponsors in 2003, and the league is as competitive as it ever has been. It could be argued that little in sports TV, marketing and licensing happens without the NFL having an effect. Sure, L.A. remains unresolved, financial disparity is a growing concern and there are the ongoing, on-field distractions of officiating mistakes and look-at-me celebrations, but, overall, it is definitely no bad thing to be Paul.



3 Phil Knight (2002: 6), *Chairman, CEO, Nike*. The Swoosh increased sports endorsement money by a third to an eye-popping \$1.44 billion in fiscal 2003, with more than a few shoeboxes of cash going to LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony, Freddy Adu and Chuck Taylor (Nike bought Converse in '03). Record revenue (\$10.3 billion) and the end of Nike's feud with key retailer Foot Locker were pluses. On the down side, Nike lost Yao Ming, not to mention a fight to prevent its NFL

endorsements from wearing Reebok hats on sidelines. For the most part, though, it was a huge year for Nike.



4 Bud Selig (2002: 3), *Commissioner, Major League Baseball*. Labor peace focused things on (gasp!) the games, and attendance and TV ratings rose. Buoyed by an All-Star Game that counted and an electrifying postseason, baseball recaptured some of its glory. Equally impressive are MLB's lucrative new deals for global licensing and TV rights fees, and savvy plans for a World Cup-style event enable Selig to dis the Olympics. But Bud still stumbles into more embarrassments than other chiefs—among them, the Expos' continuing Bingo Long existence, a widely mocked drug-testing system, the game's best player testifying before a grand jury in a steroids investigation, the lingering Pete Rose shadow and the Clemens-Zito All-Star Game roster fiasco. And, oh yes, how 'bout those Brewers? (Sure, he doesn't run them, but his daughter does.)



ACC

5 John Swofford (2002: tie 19), *Commissioner, Atlantic Coast Conference*. No one shook up the sports world more than Swofford. The domino effect of reshaping the ACC, Big East and beyond is ongoing, but there's no arguing that by adding Miami, Boston College and Virginia Tech, the ACC was strengthened and the Big East was threatened. Tens of millions of dollars shifted southward thanks to his power play, and repercussions will be felt for years as conference shifts continue.



6 David Stern (2002: 5), *Commissioner, NBA*. Is this actually erosion of his league or merely a down cycle preceding yet another surge, foreshadowed by the popularity of LeBron James and Carmelo Anthony? TV ratings for The Finals hit a 30-year low last season, and Stern got the cold shoulder not only from cable operators regarding NBA TV but also from Bucks owner Herb Kohl, who walked away from a deal to make Michael Jordan an owner, embarrassing Stern and M.J. in the process. Given his track record, Stern will act—decisively.



IMG

7 Bob Kain (2002: 22), *Co-CEO, IMG*. In the wake of the death of IMG founder Mark McCormack, Kain shares the CEO title with Alistair Johnston (No. 21). But by virtue of heading U.S. operations, Kain is first among equals. He asserts his control with attention to the bottom line, which likely will mean scaling back the company's scope. Still, IMG has launched an X Sports division, which means Kain is looking for new opportunities, just as McCormack did for so many years.



8 Mark Schweitzer (2002: not rated), *Senior V.P. of marketing*, and **Michael Robichaud** (2002: not rated), *Senior director of sports and event marketing, Nextel*. Their 10-year title sponsorship of NASCAR's top series, at \$750 million the largest sponsorship deal in sports history, turned Nextel, which had ranked fifth among wireless

providers with 7.5 percent of the market, into a major sports player. Schweitzer's vision behind the Nextel Cup deal made it happen; Robichaud has the power in dealing with NASCAR and the TV networks.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

9 George Steinbrenner (2002: 1), *Owner, New York Yankees*. He's still the most powerful owner in sports, and The Boss does things his way, pushing for deals for Javier Vazquez, Kevin Brown and Gary Sheffield to offset departures and counter the rival Red Sox. But the Yankees' World Series loss to the upstart Marlins left him without a crown for the third straight year. Elsewhere, Cablevision was forced to carry his YES Network, although Time Warner allowed everyone to opt out, and YankeeNets, the holding company that owns the Nets and Devils, was unraveling. For a man who considers finishing second a loss, it was a year of disappointments.



10 David Hill (2002: 8), *Chairman, CEO, FOX Sports Television Group*. In the 10 years since FOX jumped into sports, it has—by virtue of the money it spends and impact it has on the NFL, Major League Baseball and NASCAR—become the most important broadcast network. Still, Hill faces challenges by teams and other cable providers on the regional sports network front. His approach (think: the freewheeling FOX NFL Sunday and Best Damn Sports Show Period) continues to be the signature for the company's sports presence across all media platforms. (Note: FOX and the SPORTING NEWS are content partners on FOXSports.com.)

Nos. 11-40

11 August Busch IV (2002: 9), *President*, and **Tony Ponturo** (2002: 9), *V.P., global media and sports marketing, Anheuser-Busch Inc.* Despite a relatively quiet year, the behemoth of beers still is the most important spender of sports marketing money.

12 Roger Goodell (2002: 13), *Executive V.P., COO, NFL*. In addition to all of his other responsibilities, he helped make the NFL Network a reality.

13 Gary Bettman (2002: 10), *Commissioner, NHL*. He settled the Senators' and Sabres' financial situations, but his cash-strapped league is getting less TV time in the United States, lenders are skeptical, and a work stoppage next season appears imminent.

14 Paul Fireman (2002: not rated), *Chairman, Reebok International*. His company nabbed Yao Ming, making up for losing LeBron James, and

then plucked hoops matchmaker Sonny Vaccaro from Adidas. Stocks and revenue are soaring, proof that Reebok's NBA and NFL apparel deals are paying dividends. (Note: David Baxter, Reebok's representative in the 2002 Power 100, was ranked No. 15.)

15 Mark Shapiro (2002: 14), *Executive V.P. of programming and production, ESPN*. For better and worse, he's pushing the ESPN brand in new directions. *Playmakers* generated ill will from the NFL and ratings from viewers; *Cold Pizza* is an attempt to rev up ESPN2. But he botched the Rush Limbaugh controversy, looking weak and indecisive.

16 Bill France Jr. (2002: 11), *Vice chairman, NASCAR; Chairman, International Speedway Corporation*. NASCAR is still a sports phenomenon, as Nextel's multimillion-dollar naming rights deal proves. France has lost power since health problems caused him to hand over the keys to the car—day-to-day operation of NASCAR—to his son, Brian. Still, Dad retains final say.

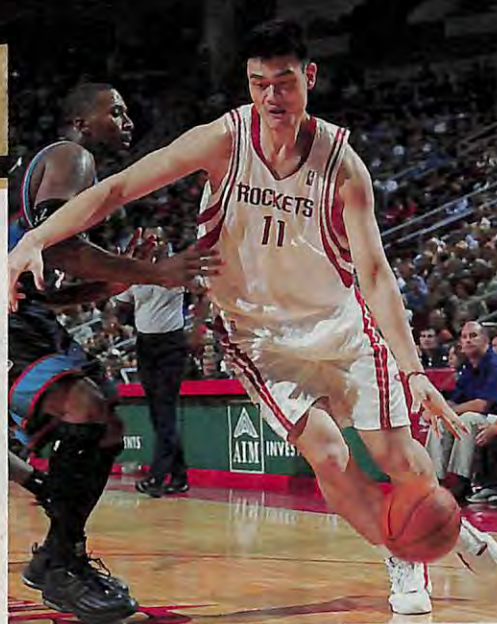
17 Brian France (2002: Sports Executives, 6), *Chairman, CEO, NASCAR*. He was promoted to take the wheel from his father, bumping Mike Helton as he passed by. He helped make the Nextel deal happen, but still must prove in the garages that he is more than a "suit" and that he's ready to be the ultimate boss.

18 Ed Goren (2002: 18), *President, Executive producer, FOX Sports*. He pushed Bud Selig to make baseball's All-Star Game count by giving the winning league home-field advantage in the World Series, because FOX wanted something at stake.

19 Bob DuPuy (2002: 20), *President, COO, MLB*. He's hands-on with licensing, international issues and baseball's cutting-edge website. He also runs the MLB-owned Expos, but has failed to unload the burden above the border.

20 Bruce McMillan (2002: 16), *Executive V.P., Group studio general manager, Electronic Arts*. EA Sports is spending big on Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004 and saw Madden NFL 2004 sell 2 million units in one three-week span. Advertising expansion has driven EA's stock to an all-time high.

21 Alistair Johnston (2002: not rated), *Co-CEO, IMG*. Equal to Bob Kain in title, he oversees all non-American IMG business, which includes Wimbledon and the British Open.



Yao's larger than life game—and presence—should aid NBA expansion into his native China.

22 Jerry Jones (2002: Behind the Scenes, 3), *Owner, President, G.M., Dallas Cowboys*. He hired Bill Parcells when others couldn't and has managed to leave Tuna alone. With renewed success on the field, Jones leverages the team's popularity off it, expanding product sales into Mexico and possibly seeking funding for a new sports complex.

23 Charles Fruit (2002: 27), *Senior V.P. for worldwide media and alliances, The Coca-Cola Co*. Coke remains a major spender in sports programming. The latest addition: Fruit poured \$15 million into College Sports Television Network.

24 Dick Ebersol (2002: 33), *Chairman, NBC Sports*. He outbid rivals for the 2010 and 2012 Olympics and got his bosses at General Electric to add \$160 million to \$200 million as sponsors. Also, presumably at his prodding, G.E. is looking at other rights bidding, quietly reaching out to the leagues.

25 Yao Ming (2002: not rated), *Houston Rockets center*. Got "LeBron money" from Reebok, plus royalties in China, where he is royalty. With the NBA pushing to expand in China, Yao could become a Jordanesque figure (earning Jordanesque figures) in the world's largest country with its white-hot economy.

26 Tiger Woods (2002: 25), *Golfer*. Shut out in the four majors, he still was PGA Player of the Year and remains one of sports' most marketable athletes. His stance on equipment testing helped make changes happen.

27 Mike Pearl (2002: not rated), *Executive producer, ABC Sports*. His top-flight NBA

productions at Turner led ABC to woo him away. He got Al Michaels to come off the bench to handle hoops play-by-play.

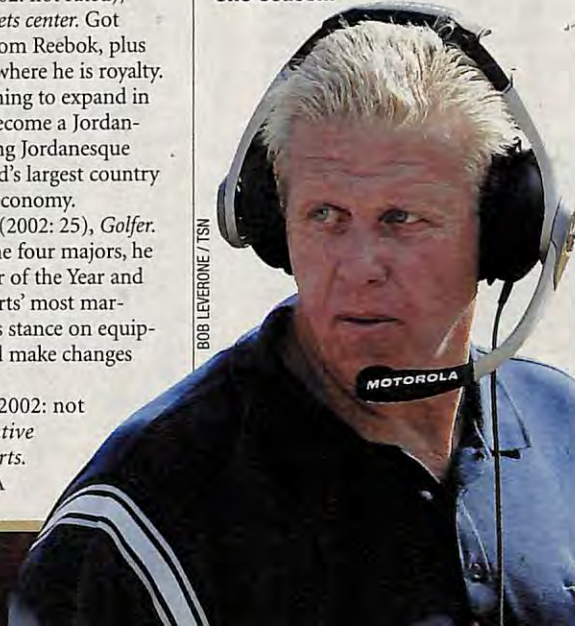
28 LeBron James (2002: 10 to Watch, 10), *Cleveland Cavaliers guard*. The most-hyped rookie ever brought high school hoops to ESPN and signed nine figures' worth of marketing deals before playing a pro game. The next "next Jordan" injected much-needed excitement

into the NBA but now faces his most difficult task: lifting the Cavaliers to legitimacy.

29 Tony Hawk (2002: 37), *Action sports entrepreneur*. He made the transition from X sports icon to one-man industry. His Boom Boom Huckjam tour rolls on, boosting sales of clothing, skateboards, video games and action figures. Perhaps the truest sign of hip status: He got a gig skateboarding against Homer in the 300th episode of *The Simpsons*.

30 Jim Delany (2002: tie 19), *Commissioner, Big Ten*. He has replaced former SEC commissioner Roy Kramer as the real mover and shaker in college sports, driving much of the BCS policy. But this year he was outshone by the ACC's John Swofford, and his BCS is increasingly beleaguered.

Parcells lifted the Cowboys from mediocrity to a playoff berth in one season.



31 Russ Granik (2002: 31), *Deputy commissioner, NBA*. As the heir to the throne, he stays in David Stern's shadow but is involved in myriad facets of the league's operation.

32 Tim Finchem (2002: 30), *Commissioner, PGA Tour*. Like his tour's top player, he didn't insert himself into—or, in turn, have a powerful impact on—the Martha-vs.-Hootie controversy at Augusta. Yet he was effective behind the scenes.

33 Jacques Rogge (2002: not rated), *President, International Olympic Committee*. He scored the year's only big rights deal, forcing NBC to go for broke with its \$2 billion winning bid. He also made his presence felt in USOC reform and in the ongoing drug-testing controversy in America. One strike against him: the losing battle to get major leaguers into Olympic baseball.

34 William Daly (2002: 38), *Executive V.P., Chief legal officer, NHL*. As labor negotiations loom large, he plays a crucial role in public and in the boardroom.

35 Serena Williams (2002: 28), *Tennis player*. Indomitable until an injury, she was voted *Sports Business Daily's* most marketable female athlete. She scored a \$40 million to \$60 million deal with Nike—what could become the largest endorsement deal ever for a woman.

36 Bill Parcells (2002: not rated), *Coach, Dallas Cowboys*. He made America's team his team on his terms to re-establish himself as the modern-day Lombardi.

37 Sean McManus (2002: 26), *President, CBS Sports*. Despite no cable outlet, he retains some clout because of his network's NFL and NCAA basketball deals. But he had to pay to air the Masters without commercials because of the Hootie Johnson controversy.

38 Donna Shalala (2002: not rated), *President, University of Miami*. John Swofford put the ball in play but couldn't have scored his college-conference coup without her.

39 Johnnie Cochran (2002: Ten to Watch, 3), *Cyrus Mehri* (2002: not rated) and *Kellen Winslow Sr.* (2002: not rated), *Founders, Fritz Pollard Alliance*. They ran a power play on Paul Tagliabue and the NFL, gaining significant minority-hiring yardage with their alliance for coaches. They helped inspire the hiring of Marvin Lewis, the fining of Lions general

THE POWER 100

manager Matt Millen and new hiring rules.

40 Abe Pollin (2002: not rated), Owner, Chairman, Washington Wizards. In the power move of the year, he knocked (gasp!) Michael Jordan off his NBA pedestal, a justifiable decision considering 1) Jordan's performance in the Wizards' front office and 2) the fact only 20 season-ticket holders took him up on his refund offer in wake of Jordan firing.

FALLEN: Myles Brand (2001: 17), President, CEO, NCAA. The NCAA landed major deals with Cingular, GM and others, but Brand exerted little authority, especially as controversies, improprieties and BCS-conference realignment played out around him.

The process As we did last year, we have ranked the top 40 individuals on this list regardless of sport, industry or job title and then, beginning with No. 41, ranked the rest of the Power 100 by category, applying an "apples to apples" comparison.

One category to note, however, is "Emperors." These individuals are more powerful than most of our Top 10, controlling broadcast and cable TV empires as well as teams. But they are not, in general, hands-on sports figures, and because their control is indirect, we placed them in a special universe. SPORTING NEWS owner Paul Allen, who also owns the Seattle Seahawks and Portland Trail Blazers, would be included in this category, but, as in the past, we have not placed him in our rankings because of the perception of conflict of interest.

Meanwhile, in four categories—top athletes, top owners, top sports executives and top media executives—members of the Power 100 Top 40 rank ahead of those listed by category in Nos. 41-100. For example, Jason Kidd is ranked No. 1 in the Athletes category, but he isn't as powerful as, say, fellow NBA players Yao Ming, who is No. 25, and LeBron James, who is No. 28, in the Power 100 Top 40. In all cases, rankings for last year's selections are in parentheses.

Nos. 41-100

EMPERORS

1. Rupert Murdoch (2002: Emperors, 2), Chairman, CEO, NewsCorp. The failure of the FOX-Dodgers synergy—only the Dodgers' on-base percentage was worse—and FOX Sports Net's struggles are non-factors now that NewsCorp.'s deal to buy DirecTV has been approved by the government. Watch The Rupert use his growing leverage in negotiations with Tags.

2. Brian Roberts, President, CEO, Comcast Corporation. He slammed Murdoch with a new Chicago regional sports network that undermines FSN. Nationwide, Comcast controls a third of all cable households, including seven of the top 10 TV markets, so when he talks about creating premium sports tiers, not only should the NFL Network, ESPN and various FOX Sports Nets worry, you should, too.

3. Michael Elsnor (2002: Emperors, 1) Chairman, CEO, Disney. The good: It was a boffo year for ESPN. The bad: He sold the Angels for a loss after a World Series victory.

FALLEN: Steve Case, former Chairman and CEO, AOL.



MATTHEW CAVANAUGH / AP

garage and in the halls of (horse)power—with two hot young drivers, NASCAR's Ryan Newman and IRL's Sam Hornish Jr. Plus, he's the head of Detroit's Super Bowl host committee.

4. Robert Kraft (2002: 35), New England Patriots. Though he failed in his push to add two more wild-card teams to the NFL playoffs, he's still a key voice on key committees. His team isn't bad, either.

5. Daniel Snyder (2002: Owners, 6), Washington Redskins. Old-guard owners show disdain—until they see what he has done for the value of his team (team+stadium=\$1.5 billion) and what that means to the value of their teams.

FALLEN: Tom Hicks, Texas Rangers.

OWNERS

1. Dan Rooney (2002: Owners, 1), Pittsburgh Steelers. Forget John Facenda on the old NFL Films footage; this guy is the league's voice of authority, particularly on sensitive issues such as minority hiring.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

2. Robert Johnson (2002: 10 to Watch, 1), Charlotte Bobcats. As the first black majority owner in a major professional sport, he's improving minority

hiring and spending \$1 million on advertising to promote his team.

3. Roger Penske, NASCAR, IRL teams. He has serious lift—in the

4. Steve Sabol (2002: Sports executives, 1), President, NFL Films. He shapes the league's image with his images; the NFL Network gives him a new forum for his magic.



5. Tony George (2002: 10 to Watch, 6), Founder, IRL; President, CEO,

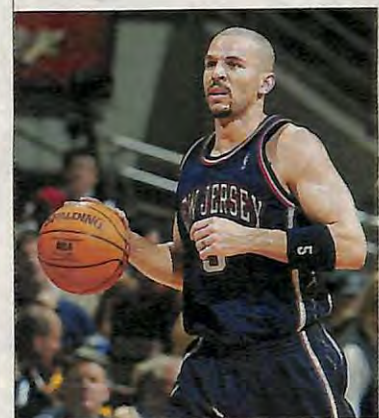
Indianapolis

Motor Speedway Corp. As the IRL's attendance and TV presence grow, he smells CART's blood in the water. Crucial move: keeping driver Sam Hornish Jr. from leaving for NASCAR.

6. Mike Helton (2002: 21), President, NASCAR. He still plays a vital role, despite being surpassed by Brian France.

7. Sandy Alderson (2002: Sports Executives, 5), Executive V.P. baseball operations, MLB. Making umpires learn and enforce a semi-consistent strike zone is terrific, but QuesTec was an embarrassment that gave his credibility, not to mention the idea of him as the successor to Bud Selig as commissioner, a serious hit.

FALLEN: Mike Tranchese (2002: tie 19), Commissioner, Big East.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

EXECUTIVES

1. Gene Upshaw, Executive director, NFLPA. Labor peace allows him to focus on other issues, and—what a concept!—the commish listens to him and allows him a say. He helped force Nike to back off in its sideline apparel battle with Reebok.

2. Bob Goodenow (2002: 10 to Watch, 2), Executive director, NHLPA. In the twisted world of labor negotiations, the longer the NHL's lack of a new collective bargaining agreement drags on, the more juice he assumes (until the breaking point, of course).

3. Donald Fehr (2002: 29), Executive director, MLBPA. In a relatively quiet year, his union refused to allow a ban of or testing for Ephedrine and helped Expos players stand up to the commissioner. For good measure, he threw his weight around regarding USOC reform.

ATHLETES

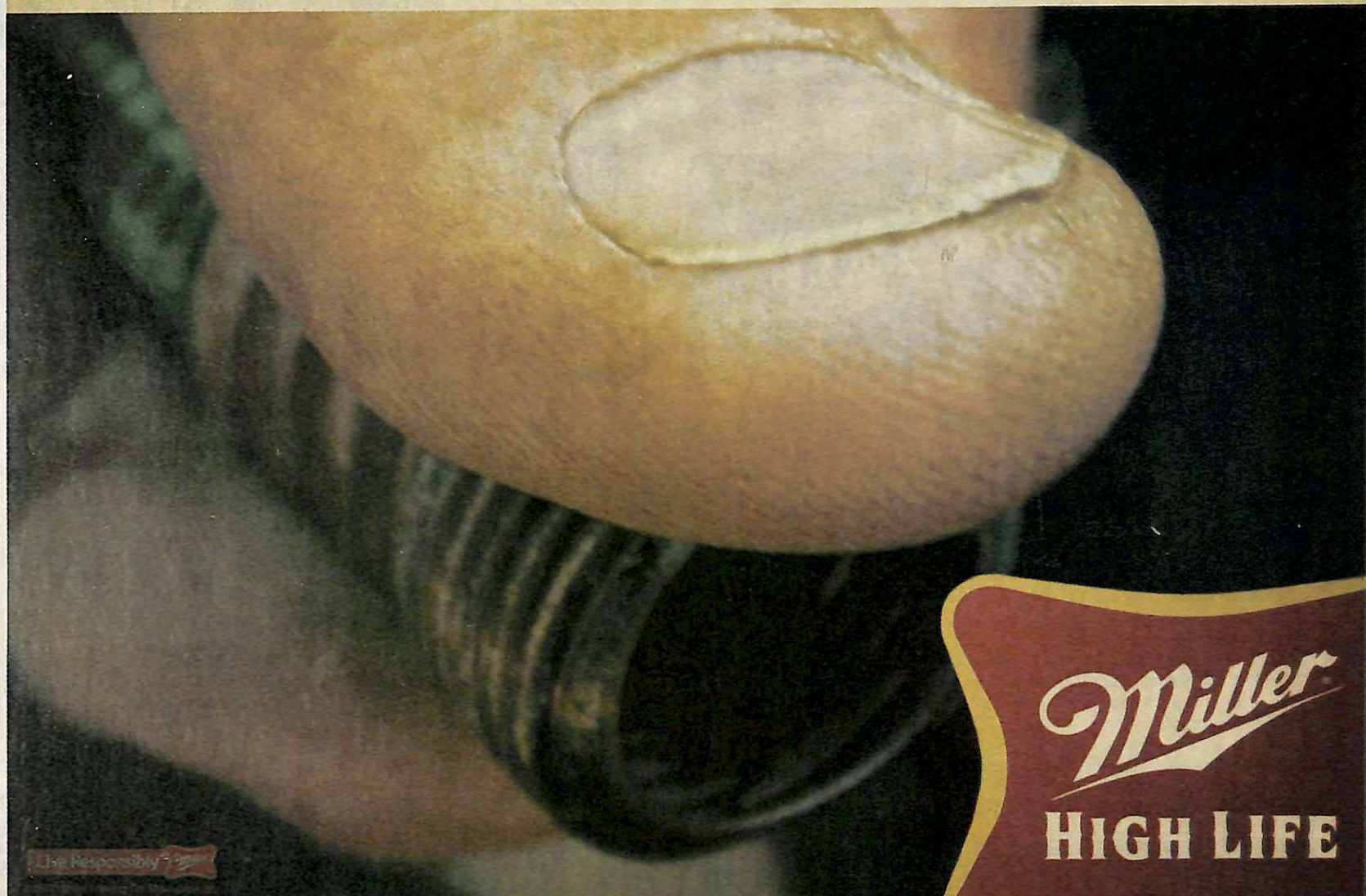
1. Jason Kidd, New Jersey Nets. The NBA offseason was about where he would go. He had the balance of power in his hands, and now he has coach Byron Scott in his pocket.

2. Curt Schilling, Boston Red Sox. He stole the offseason spotlight from free agents such as Vladimir Guerrero and Gary Sheffield, not to mention Yankees owner George Steinbrenner. If Boston wins it all, he'll be deified. And he did it all without an agent.

Precision guidance systems and you.

When properly applied to the nozzle of a typical garden hose, a man's thumb is nothing short of a technological marvel. With the slightest shift of angle, it can target water with pinpoint accuracy, usually within

two inches of the average begonia. Once the horticultural chores are over, the thumb still has one important task to perform: Flipping up the tab on a can of Miller High Life. What will they think of next?



Miller
HIGH LIFE

THE POWER 100

3. **Shaquille O'Neal** (2002: Athletes, 4), *Los Angeles Lakers*. His ability to attract Karl Malone and Gary Payton to L.A. has a championship ring to it. Add in \$14 million in endorsements, and you have the face of the player-brand.

4. **Dale Earnhardt Jr.**, *Nextel Cup*. Win or lose, Junior's name and image outsell everyone's on the circuit and take Dale Earnhardt Inc. and NASCAR to the mainstream. That's why 1) Budweiser shelled out \$60 million for three more years with him, and 2) NASCAR sometimes seems to bend the rules for Little E.

5. **Barry Bonds** (2002: Athletes, 3), *San Francisco Giants*. His clutch performance during his dad's illness and after his death was astounding; his breaking from the players' union over marketing rights was confounding. But the BALCO investigation could end with the rarest of all things: a strikeout by B.B.

6. **David Beckham**, *Real Madrid*. The former Man U star brings cash and cachet to Real Madrid soccer team, and though his P.R. push into the United States met with mixed reviews, he is among the world's most popular athletes.

FALLEN: Kobe Bryant, *Los Angeles Lakers*.

MEDIA EXECUTIVES

1. **John Walsh** (2002: Media Executives, 1), *Senior V.P., Executive editor, ESPN*. He controls *SportsCenter*, which translates to this: He controls the sports of coverage you see, night in and night out.

2. **Mark Lazarus** (2002: Media Executives, 2), *President, Turner Entertainment*. He added "entertainment" to his responsibilities, but we hear he hasn't given up sports, remaining hands-on.

3. **John Skipper** (2002: Media Executives, 4), *Senior V.P. and G.M., ESPN.com and ESPN: The Magazine*. He runs the most popular sports website and an award-winning magazine, plus Emerging Media and Data Services, which includes wireless, broadband and interactive TV.

4. **Ron Semiao** (2002: 34), *Senior V.P. ESPN Original Entertainment, ESPN*. Original programming heads ESPN's push to capture casual mainstream sports fans, thus his role is expanding.

5. **Bob Thompson**, *President, FOX Sports Networks*. He replaced Tracy Dolgin (2002: Media executives, 3) but faces increased competition from

team-backed regional sports networks as well as cable operators such as Comcast. 54321 flopped, and FSN laid off staffers and suffered defections, too.

FALLEN: Howard Katz, *former President, ABC Sports*

WOMEN

1. **Julie Foudy**, *Soccer player*. Even more than Donna de Varona, she became the public face who stopped the Bush Administration from eviscerating Title IX.

2. **Annika Sorenstam**, *Golfer*. She didn't win at the Colonial—she didn't even make the cut—but she reopened the PGA to women and got even non-fans to watch golf.

3. **Leslie France Kennedy**, *President, International Speedway Corp.* As Bill France Jr. steps back at NASCAR, she gains more clout.

4. **Val Ackerman**, *President, WNBA*. David Stern controls the bottom line, but she is the only woman commissioner of the only active women's pro league.

5. **Amy Trask**, *Chief executive, Oakland Raiders*. Is she the heir apparent to Raiders Bossdom? Anyone Al Davis trusts can't be ignored.

6. **Jeanie Buss**, *Executive V.P. of business operations, Los Angeles Lakers*. More than just the boss' daughter, she's also legendary coach Phil Jackson's girlfriend and a savvy business exec. Now even Hollywood is calling—NBC is developing a series based on her life.

7. **Jean Afterman**, *Assistant G.M., New York Yankees*. Part of The Boss' brain trust, she recruited Hideki Matsui.

8. **Lee Ann Daly**, *Senior V.P. marketing, ESPN*. Responsible for the ESPN brand you've come to know so well, she is planning the network's biggest marketing campaign ever for 2004.

9. **Lisa Murray**, *Executive V.P. consulting, Octagon North America*. Her sports marketing group added big clients such as Home Depot and Bank of America, but nothing tops brokering the Nextel-NASCAR deal.

FALLEN: Lynn Morgan, *Commissioner, WUSA*



DENIS POROY / AP

AGENTS

1. **Arn Tellem** (2002: Agents, 2), *President, CEO, SFX Basketball Group and SFX Baseball Group*. His stable includes 25 percent of all NBA players (five 2003 lottery picks). With the departure of brothers Randy and Alan Hendricks, he took over SFX Baseball, which handles 16 percent of all major leagues.



SHIZUO KAMAYASHI / AP

2. **Tom Condon** (2002: Agents, 3), *President, IMG Football*. He handles not only many top NFL players but also NFLPA chief Gene Upshaw, the NFL officials union and several head coaches.

3. **Scott Boras** (2002: Agents, 1), *The Scott Boras Corp.* Love him (clients do) or hate him (owners and G.M.s do), he's the master of assessing and marketing talent, though baseball's free-agent glut this offseason has had an impact on his impact.

4. **David Dunn** (2002: Agents, Fallen), *Athletes First*. He survived



MEDIA PERSONALITIES

1. **Lee Corso, Chris Fowler, Kirk Herbstreit**, *ESPN*. Think their *College GameDay* is all about shtick? Not so fast, my friend. TV's most desired demographic worships them on campuses nationwide. Their comments shape and influence everything from Heisman voting to poll rankings.

2. **Doug Collins**, *TNT*. ABC and TNT wanted him so badly as an NBA analyst that he could write his own ticket.

3. **Al Michaels**, *ABC Sports*. Already the voice of *Monday Night Football*, he now has another role: savior of ABC's NBA telecasts.

4. **Peter Gammons**, *ESPN*. No matter if Bud Selig voided the first Aaron Boone-to-the-Yankees deal because of Gammons' on-air outrage on *Baseball 2Night*, that was the perception.

5. **Joe Buck** (2002: Media Personalities, 2), *FOX*. Already FOX's No. 1 in the NFL and in MLB, he added another national forum for his, um, offbeat sense of humor: a writing gig at the SPORTING NEWS.

FALLEN: Rush Limbaugh, *former ESPN commentator*.

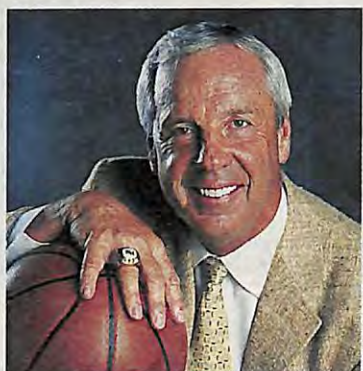
bankruptcy, as well as Leigh Steinberg and the NFLPA's attempt to keep him from repping NFL players, to get a record signing for No. 1 overall pick Carson Palmer.

FALLEN: David Falk (2002: Agents, 5), *Founder, SFX Basketball.*

COACHES/ MANAGERS

1. **Jon Gruden**, *Tampa Bay Buccaneers*. The Michael Vick of coaches in terms of persona and buzz, he won the Super Bowl in January. Then, during the flame-out of a follow-up season, he asserted his power over the players and the front office by dumping receiver Keyshawn Johnson.

2. **Roy Williams**, *University of North Carolina basketball*. When two of



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

nation's top hoops schools woo you in the wake of a Final Four appearance, then you're a player and not merely a coach.

3. **Larry Brown**, *Detroit Pistons*. He called his own shot and shifted the balance of power in the NBA's Eastern Conference.

4. **Brad Gilbert**, *tennis*. The man who revived Andre Agassi's career has catapulted Andy Roddick to the top.

5. **Marvin Lewis**, *Cincinnati Bengals*. Anybody who can make this team respectable can write his own ticket—and maybe shatter the ol' (white) boys coach-hiring network in the process.

FALLEN: Dave Bliss, former basketball coach, Baylor University

jeers over his *Moneyball*-driven stardom, Beane made the new math matter by winning in Oakland. Sabermetric G.M.s such as J.P. Ricciardi and Theo Epstein owe their paychecks to him.

2. **Theo Epstein**, G.M., *Boston Red Sox*. He assembled a team that came so close, didn't wait too long to give manager Grady Little the hook and then made the move of the year by getting Curt Schilling. Take that, George.

3. **Kevin White**, A.D., *Notre Dame*. He faces serious external pressure to bring Irish football to a conference but has stood up for independence—for now—with NBC's help, of course.

4. **Rich McKay**, G.M., *Atlanta Falcons*. Suffered a power brownout with Tampa Bay, but before joining Arthur Blank with Atlanta he helped construct a Super Bowl champion and kept the playoffs from expanding as co-chair of the crucial Competition Committee.

5. **Larry Bird**, *President of basketball operations, Indiana Pacers*. Larry Legend established himself immediately in his old stomping grounds by

dumping Isiah Thomas and installing his guy, Rick Carlisle, as coach.

FALLEN: Michael Jordan, former *President, Washington Wizards.*

BEHIND THE SCENES



ESPN

1. **Tim Brosnan** (2002: 10 to Watch, 5), *Executive V.P., business, MLB*. MLB is raking it in with unparalleled new global licensing agreements and foreign TV rights

deals; a World Cup-style tourney and an MLB Network might be next.

2. **David D'Alessandro** (2002: 23), *CEO, John Hancock Financial Services*. Helped make the USOC audit happen by pushing the issue before the Senate and providing key testimony.

3. **Mark Warner**, *Governor, Virginia*. He pressured UVA to ensure that Virginia Tech—not Syracuse—was invited from the Big East to join the

ACC.

4. **Paul Brooks**, *Senior V.P., NASCAR*. He shadows Brian France at every turn, having just moved back East from a TV job to help out with Brian's new role.

5. **Dave Dryden**, *Chair, Injury Analysis Panel, NHL*. He propelled the change in goalie and elbow pads. Now on his radar: sticks.

FALLEN: Edward J. Plummer, *Founder and owner, QuesTec*

BOTTOM OF THE TOP

100. **Seabiscuit**. He wins by a nose over Funny Cide, who boosted ratings and created a marketing bonanza but

faded down the stretch while *Seabiscuit* became a hit movie that actually drove people to the tracks.



AP

A BAKER'S DOZEN TO WATCH

1. **Alex Rodriguez**, *Shortstop, Texas Rangers*. Proving money isn't everything, baseball's best put himself on the market; unfortunately for him it was a "No Sale" ... for now.

2. **Maurice Clarett**, *Ohio State football player*, and **Jeremy Bloom**, *University of Colorado football player and Olympics moguls skier*. They're knock, knock, knock! on the NFL's and NCAA's doors, lawyers in tow, with the prospect of changing NFL draft and NCAA amateurism rules.

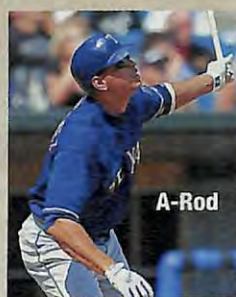
3. **Steve Bornstein**, *President and CEO, NFL Network*. He endured a bumpy start, but don't bet against him bucking the cable trend toward sticking newcomers on sports tiers.

4. **Wayne Gretzky** (2002: Owners, 3), *Managing partner, Phoenix Coyotes*. The Great One might be the one voice that both sides in the collective bargaining dispute will heed.

5. **Chase Carey**, *President, CEO-designate, Hughes Electronics*. An acclaimed TV executive, he will have a huge impact on the next NFL deal and those in other sports now that Rupert Murdoch's purchase of DirecTV has been approved by the government.

6. **Andy Roddick**, *Tennis player*. He's ranked No. 1, he's the defending U.S. Open champ, and he's an endorsement magnet. (Just don't ask what we think of the SNL gig.)

7. **The Marlins' rotation**. If healthy, Josh Beckett, Brad Penny, Carl Pavano, Dontrelle Willis and A.J. Burnett will put the Braves' Maddux-Smolts-Glavine era to shame; if



DAVID DUBOCHIK FOR TSN

A-Rod



NICK LIT / AP

Moreno

not, they're the new-millennium version of the Mets' Pulsipher-Wilson-Isringhausen combination.

8. **Arthur Blank**, *Owner, Atlanta Falcons*. He has Michael Vick and has dumped Dan Reeves, but it's his emphasis on consumer research and customer service that other owners are watching.

9. **Michael Vick**, *Quarterback, Atlanta Falcons*. If not for the broken leg—and the subsequent dance over his return—he would have made the 100 as an NFL player equally electrifying on and off the field.

10. **Arturo Moreno**, *Owner, Anaheim Angels*. Major professional sports' first Hispanic owner leads the way to new fan-friendly baseball by spending for talent while cutting ticket prices and, more important, beer prices.

11. **Shaun White**, *Skateboarder and snowboarder*. A 17-year-old with a seven-figure income, he is the sole client of IMG's new X Sports Division.

12. **Bruton Smith**, *Chairman, Speedway Motorsports Inc.* A racetrack powerhouse, and thorn in NASCAR's side, he forced Bill France Jr.'s deposition in a lawsuit involving race-tracks that finally is on the docket for 2004.

13. **Dr. Frankenstein**, *underground drugmaker*, vs. **Dick Pound**, *chairman of the World Anti-Doping Agency*. Someone, somewhere is making a new, more powerful, more difficult-to-detect steroid to replace THG. Pound will lead the charge to stop that someone.

FRONT OFFICE

1. **Billy Beane**, G.M., *Oakland A's*. Despite peers'



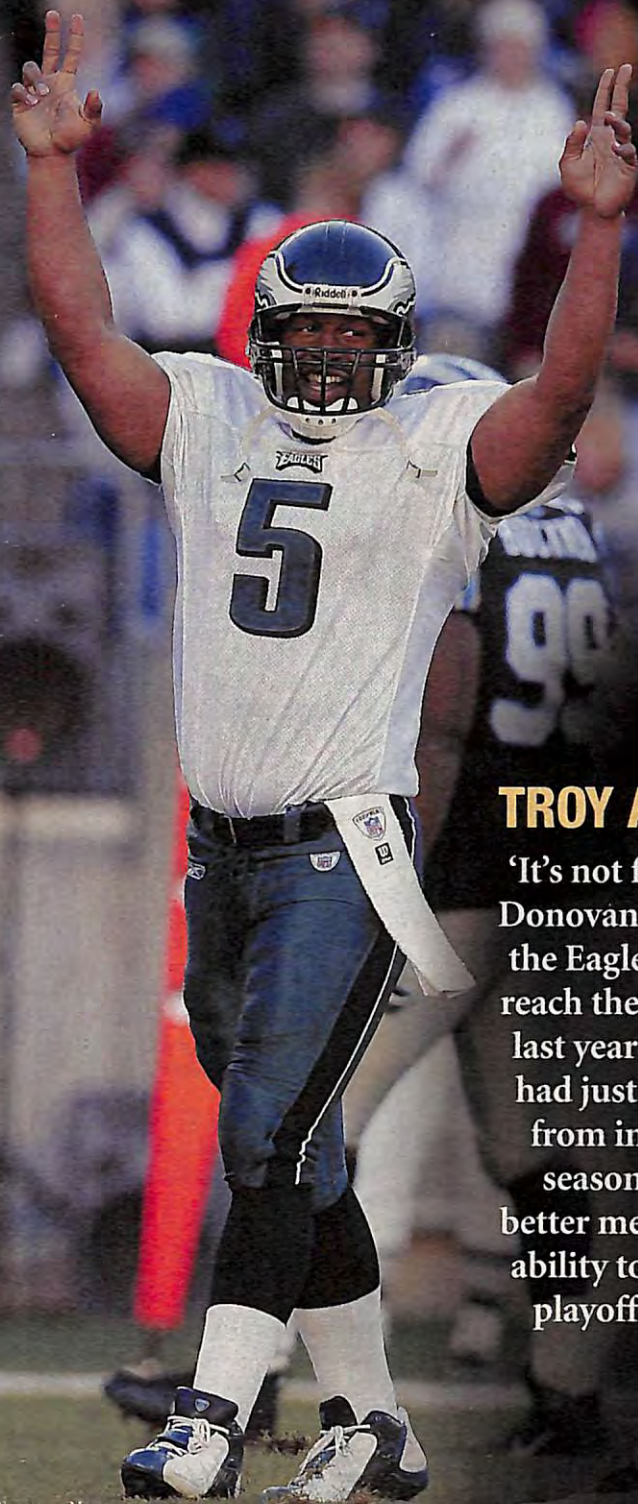
JUSTIN SULLIVAN / AP

TSN INSIDER



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

PAGE 47



TROY AIKMAN:

'It's not fair to judge Donovan McNabb on the Eagles' failure to reach the Super Bowl last year because he had just come back from injury. This season will be a better measure of his ability to win in the playoffs.' —Page 39

NFL 37-46

THE WAR ROOM There's a good fit available for every team with a head coaching vacancy. **INSIDE DISH** Saints defensive end Darren Howard's contract is up, but he isn't going anywhere. **TROY AIKMAN** The Eagles have the experience and hunger to make it to the Super Bowl. **DRAFT DISH** LSU's Corey Webster isn't likely to use his extra year of eligibility. Plus, **TEAM INSIDERS**, **SCOUTS' VIEWS** and more.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL 47

MATT HAYES Forget about the big paychecks—coaching in the NFL just isn't worth it. **INSIDE DISH** Coach Karl Dorrell must accept responsibility for UCLA's late-season meltdown.

NBA 48-51

SEAN DEVENEY The Pistons need consistency from Chauncey Billups to reach their potential. **INSIDE DISH** The inevitable clash between Ron Artest and Rick Carlisle has shown itself in Indy, but don't expect Artest to be shipped out just yet. **STRAIGHT SHOOTING** The best and worst of every team at the midpoint of the season.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL 52-55

MIKE DeCOURCY This season's conference races are more important than ever. **INSIDE DISH** Kennedy Winston's emergence as a scoring force for Alabama is directly tied to his improving health. Plus, **SCOUTS' VIEWS**, **POWER POLL** and more.

NHL 56-58

KARA YORIO The IIHF World Junior Hockey Championships feature the world's top young talent. **INSIDE DISH** Expect increased production from Oleg Kvasha as he fills in for Alexei Yashin.

NASCAR 59

LEE SPENCER General manager Eddie D'Hondt is working on an overhaul of Robert Yates Racing. **INSIDE DISH** Nextel Cup teams will benefit from extra testing sessions this season.

BASEBALL 60-62

DAVE SHEININ After years of mediocrity, the Orioles are ready to compete again. **INSIDE DISH** Greg Vaughn is trying to make a comeback with the Cardinals. Plus, **TEAM INSIDERS**.

FANTASY 63

PLAY ACTION Where to draft this season's surprises.

BOB LEVERONE / TSN



GARY HORTON'S INSIDER

warroom@sportingnews.com

SPEED READS

■ Strong cases for MVP can be made for both Steve McNair and Peyton Manning, who finished in a rare tie for the honor, but our vote goes to Manning. He led the league in passing yards (4,267), led the AFC with 29 TD throws and completed a franchise-record 67.0 percent of his passes. Most important, he and the Colts swept McNair and the Titans in the teams' two regular-season games.

■ The Rams' loss to Detroit in their regular-season finale probably cost them a trip to the Super Bowl. A victory would have given the Rams, who have won 14 in a row at home, home-field advantage throughout the playoffs. Now, the Rams (4-4 on the road this season) might have to go to Philadelphia for the NFC championship game. Playing outside in the cold gives the Eagles a gigantic advantage over the Rams, who were built to play inside on artificial turf.

■ The coin flip to determine whether the Browns or Falcons pick seventh in the draft will be crucial. Both teams want to draft the same player, Iowa tackle Robert Gallery.

Match game: coaches and vacancies

The annual postseason coaching carousel is in full spin as seven NFL teams, nearly 25 percent of the league, try to fill vacancies. Although none of those clubs asked us to be a headhunter, we'll offer our advice anyway—free of charge.

Cardinals. Even in an era when the salary cap and free agents put teams on equal footing, owner Bill Bidwill makes winning difficult. Parity is a goal for the NFL, but Bidwill's tight pockets have left his team thirsty for wins in the desert. That's why Arizona's next coach must be strong-minded enough to run his own show and persuasive enough to convince Bidwill to spend more.

Dennis Green would be an excellent fit. Green, 97-62 during the regular season in 10 years with the Vikings, has loads of coaching and personnel experience. He also has handled the pressure of prickly ownership, having worked for the meddlesome Red McCombs in Minnesota. It has become increasingly difficult for one man to wear the hats of head coach and general manager, but Green's history of controlling personnel decisions certainly would help vice president of football operations Rod Graves.

Falcons. Owner Arthur Blank seems open to the idea of hiring a defensive-minded coach, such as Rams defensive coordinator Lovie Smith, but that would be a mistake. Atlanta's most important player is quarterback Michael Vick, so the team's target should be an offensive guru.

The best candidate will be proven in quarterback development and creative and open-minded enough to adjust his scheme to fit Vick's versatile skills. Patriots offensive coordinator Charlie Weis doesn't have head coaching experience, but he has done an exceptional job of molding Tom Brady and tweaking New England's scheme to take advantage of Brady's strengths. The majority of Weis' 14 years in the NFL have been spent under Bill Parcells and Bill Belichick. What better preparation is there for a head coaching job?

Bills. First, they must cut guard Ruben Brown and restructure quarterback Drew Bledsoe's contract to free up enough money to re-sign free-agent cornerback

Antoine Winfield. Then, they should use their first-round pick on a tight end (either Miami's Kellen Winslow or Florida's Ben Troupe). If they can cross off those items on their to-do list, this will be an enticing job.

After whiffing on the Gregg Williams hire, this team needs someone with head coaching experience. Expect the Bills to give long looks to former NFL head coaches Jim Fassel and Tom Coughlin; either would be an excellent fit.

Bears. As desolate a place as Chicago has seemed for a coach recently, the Bears' strong tradition and cache of promising young players make this job a nice opportunity. LSU coach Nick Saban was rumored to be on his way in once Dick Jauron was declared out, but Saban isn't leaving Baton Rouge.

Bears G.M. Jerry Angelo reportedly is interested in Iowa coach Kirk Ferentz, but Ferentz has said he isn't sure he wants to deal with the headache of the NFL right now. He also has a new home and a son, Brian, who will play for the Hawkeyes next season. The Bears should try to change his mind.

Ferentz has surrounded himself with excellent coordinators—Ken O'Keefe and Norm Parker—who probably would accompany him from Iowa City to Chicago. Ferentz was the driving force behind the development of quarterbacks Brad Banks and Nate Chandler, a crucial need given how much of the Bears' future rides on the growth of Rex Grossman.

Giants. This vacancy could be harder to fill than most. Expectations are high despite a roster that has several holes,



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most notably on the offensive line and at defensive tackle. The new man should have head coaching experience and be able to juggle egos and instill discipline in a team that grossly underachieved, even before it was overcome by injuries. And he also must have the temperament to deal with the New York media.

That's why tough guy Coughlin makes the most sense. Veterans Michael Strahan, Tiki Barber and Mike Barrow know they are running out of time to win a Super Bowl. They also realize that youngsters such as tight end Jeremy Shockey and cornerback Will Peterson need discipline, so they likely would toe the line in a Coughlin dictatorship.

Raiders. Cowboys offensive coordinator Maurice Carthon and former University of Washington coach Rick Neuheisel have been rumored as the two leading candidates. Though both have potential, neither would be the right fit in Oakland. With another rookie coach, the Raiders likely would be saddled with many of the same problems they had under Bill Callahan.

It would be out of character, but owner Al Davis needs to hire an experienced coach who will stand up to him, like Jon Gruden once did. Davis and Gruden weren't bosom buddies, but the Raiders were successful under Gruden, who wasn't afraid to stick to his guns when Davis disagreed. Green would make the most sense, but don't bet on Davis hiring him.

Redskins. Owner Daniel Snyder's inability to keep his hands out of the day-

DISH

INSIDE

By DAN POMPEI

to-day operations makes this the least attractive opening. The Redskins already have struck out with two strong-willed coaches (Marty Schottenheimer and Steve Spurrier), but their situation would grow only worse under a yes man.

This team—which is loaded with individual talent and should be able to re-sign free-agent cornerback Champ Bailey after giving linebacker LaVar Arrington a contract extension—needs a domineering personality to force Snyder to stand down. Vice president of football operations Vinny Cerrato seems to have steered Snyder toward hiring someone with previous NFL head coaching experience, which would be a major coup. **TSN**

S Follow all the NFL playoff action with GameTrax, play-by-play and up-to-the-minute statistics at www.foxsports.com, keyword: NFL scores.

M@IL BONDING

THE WAR ROOM ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS

Which 2004 draft prospect figures to have the biggest impact on the NFL?

Scott Guetschow, St. Louis

Scott: If Pittsburgh's Larry Fitzgerald is allowed to enter the draft, he'll make the biggest impact. His maturity separates him from the other elite receiver prospects in this class, including Texas' Roy Williams and Washington's Reggie Williams. Fitzgerald not only has the physical skills scouts look for, but he also reads defenses well and is an excellent downfield blocker.

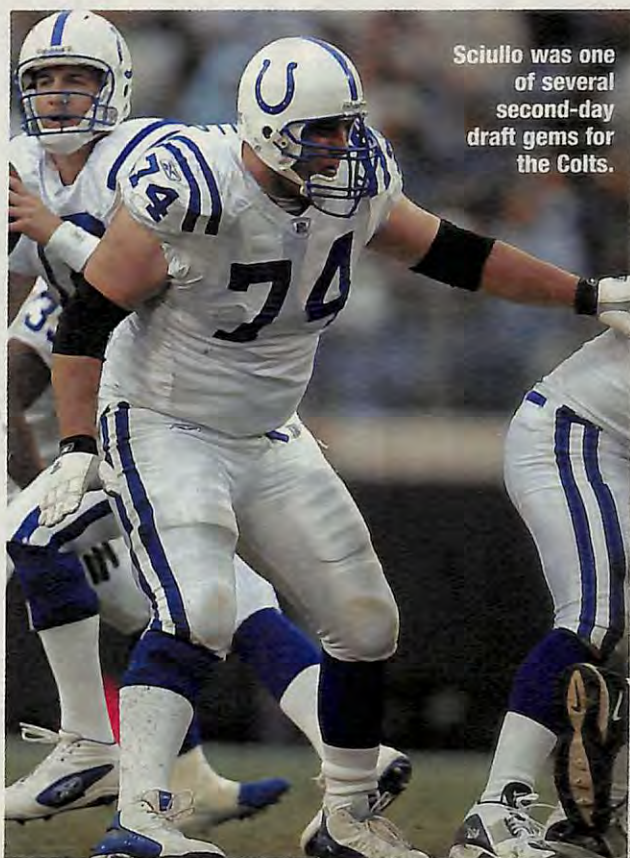
If Fitzgerald is barred from entering the draft, Iowa offensive tackle Robert Gallery could make the biggest impact. Arkansas tackle Shawn Andrews is stronger and may be the better overall prospect from a physical standpoint, but Gallery is the better athlete and doesn't have Andrews' character or health issues. As a result, Gallery likely will be drafted ahead of Andrews.

Though Eli Manning of Mississippi and Ben Roethlisberger of Miami (Ohio) are two of our highest-rated prospects, quarterbacks need the most time to develop. Oklahoma's Tommie Harris is our No. 1 overall prospect, but defensive tackles also typically struggle to meet expectations as rookies.

E-mail: warroom@sportingnews.com.

Things got so bad for the Chargers' defense that about a quarter of the way into the season, coach **Marty Schottenheimer** took over the unit. No one outside of the organization knew about it, but Schottenheimer was running the defensive meetings and overseeing the defensive game-planning. Under Schottenheimer's leadership, the defense backed off from playing so much man-to-man and evolved into more of a cover 2 team. Now, Schottenheimer is shopping for a new defensive coordinator after letting **Dale Lindsey** go. ... RE **Darren Howard**, whose contract has expired, would be one of the most sought-after free agents if the Saints allowed him to reach the market. They won't. The Saints have been trying to sign Howard to a new contract. If the talks fail, they plan to use the franchise tag on him. The Saints see their young core of defensive linemen—Howard, LE **Charles Grant** and DT **Johnathan Sullivan**—as one of their strengths. ... This is how disgusted **Bill Callahan** became with his team: Late in the season, one player noticed a football in the dumpster outside of the Raiders' practice facility. He picked it up and noticed it was a painted game ball, the kind awarded after victories. This one was inscribed to Callahan. It was from his players to mark his first victory as a head coach (September 8, 2002). ... Is **Steve Spurrier** finished in the NFL? That's what he's telling friends after resigning from the Redskins. But no one would be surprised if Spurrier returned to the league after taking a year off. Next time, though, he would be more selective about finding the right fit and pay less attention to the size of his contract. ... Look for **Dennis Erickson** to become much more involved with the 49ers' offense in 2004. When he became the 49ers' head coach, he wanted to allow the holdover assistants to run the same systems they had been running. But as the season progressed, he became more and more active in game-planning. Next season, Erickson plans

on simplifying the terminology and using more one-back and spread packages, as he has in the past. Erickson also will take a bigger role with the defense, though he acknowledges that is not his area of specialty. ... Year in and year out, the Colts do as good a job of drafting as anyone. They wouldn't have made the playoffs this season without so many strong contributions from their rookie class. Everyone knows about TE **Dallas Clark** and Ss **Mike Doss** and **Donald Strickland**, their first-day picks. But where G.M. **Bill Polian** and director of football operations **Dom Anile** really excelled was finding players after the third round. In the fourth round, they found starting RG **Steve Sciollo**. In the fifth, they picked up DE **Robert Mathis**, who has made big contributions as a pass-rush specialist. In the sixth, they drafted **Makoa Freitas**, who started six games at left tackle in place of **Tarik Glenn**. They also brought in several undrafted free agents who made contributions, including starting FB **Tom Lopienski**, return specialist **Brad Pyatt**, LB **Gary Brackett** and WR **Aaron Moorehead**.



Sciollo was one of several second-day draft gems for the Colts.

BOB LEVERONE / TSN



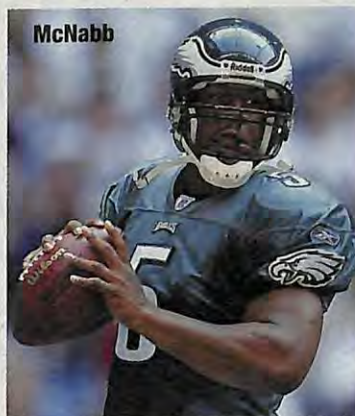
TROY AIKMAN

Hunger—not home field—is the Eagles' biggest edge

The Eagles and Rams, the top seeds in the NFC, must be considered the favorites to represent their conference in the Super Bowl, though neither team is head and shoulders above the other—or even over the rest of the playoff field. A few things are on my mind heading into their first games:

Marc Bulger. He's the Rams' X-factor. He has had a pretty good year, though he tied for the league lead with 22 interceptions. In the biggest test of his young career, a Week 17 game at Detroit in which playoff home-field advantage was at stake, he played poorly (as did others) and the Rams lost. In the playoffs, the stage gets bigger. I can't wait to see how he responds.

Donovan McNabb. It's not fair to judge McNabb on the Eagles' failure to reach the Super Bowl last year because he had just come back from injury. Now, he's healthy and is playing his best ball of the season. This will be a better measure of his ability



McNabb

ROBERT SEALE / TSN

to win in the playoffs.

Home field. It's an advantage, but it's not a be-all and end-all. Look at Tampa Bay, which supposedly couldn't win in cold weather, yet rolled into Philly last year and upset the Eagles. And the Eagles have a better record on the road (7-1) than at home (5-3) this year. Still, I'm sure they're happy to know that if they have to play the Rams—who

were undefeated at home—it'll be in Philly.

Philly's run defense. I'm the last guy who'll say that you have to stop the run to win in the playoffs, but the Eagles have a real problem here. More than just the yards, they give up way too many big plays. And it's big plays, whether on the ground or in the air, that beat you.

Brian Westbrook. If he's out for the playoffs, the Eagles are minus one of the few explosive offensive players they have.

Hunger. Philly has lost the NFC championship game the last two years. The disappointment of losing that game is indescribable. If I had to predict an NFC champ now, it'd be the Eagles. They just might want it more than everybody else.

The Troy Aikman Show airs at 5 p.m. ET every Thursday through the Super Bowl on Sporting News Radio. Listen online at <http://radio.sportingnews.com>.

SCOUTING REPORT



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Tedy Bruschi ILB, Patriots

STRENGTHS: Attacks the line of scrimmage, is physical at the point of attack and explodes into blockers. Has adequate lower-body strength, plays with a good base and can hold his ground. Plays with a nonstop motor, takes good pursuit angles and always seems to be around the ball. Wraps up well in the open field and is a powerful tackler who is capable of jarring the ball loose. Shows excellent instincts in coverage, gets great depth on his drops in zones and has the ball skills to make big plays. Gets his hands into receivers when playing man coverage and will muscle them out of their routes. Started his career at outside linebacker, and he still has the versatility and skills to line up there, too.

WEAKNESSES: Is overaggressive at times and occasionally takes himself out of the play by overrunning the hole. Lacks great athletic ability, isn't fast enough to run with most backs or tight ends downfield and needs to get a good push at the line to be effective in man coverage. Doesn't have great size, and bigger offensive linemen can have success by engulfing him at the line. His durability is somewhat of an issue; he missed two games in 1999 with a sprained knee, one game in 2001 with a leg injury and five games in 2002 with another knee injury.

BOTTOM LINE: Bruschi makes up for his weaknesses with his approach. He is relentless in pursuit and aggressive when filling interior gaps against the run. His instincts in coverage are outstanding, and he always seems to come up with a big play at crucial times. His intensity makes him a leader of a strong defense. —*The War Room*

Scouts' views

Observations and opinions from two NFL pro scouts, one from each conference:

Without a doubt, **LaDainian Tomlinson** is the most complete running back in the NFL. He runs behind a very marginal offensive line—unlike **Priest Holmes**, who seems to get a lot more credit. There's not anything Tomlinson can't do for you. He's a guy who can be an inside/outside runner, he has excellent vision, he caught a hundred balls this year, and he's a smart player who can pick up blitzes. He's an every-down guy. ... There was a definite drop-off in **Warren Sapp's** production and his ability to be an impact player this season. I think he still has some juice left, but not nearly enough to be the dominating player he's been in the past. ... The Dolphins made a good decision in keeping **Dave Wannstedt**. He's won 41 games in four years there. There's a lot of coaches in this league who would like to average 10 wins a year. I think a decision Wannstedt needs to make is changing his offensive coordinator, **Norv Turner**. The main reason the Dolphins have not made the playoffs is not Dave Wannstedt; it's the inability of their offense to score points. ... As a personnel guy, you'd like to have **Terrell Owens** on your team because you believe he can be a productive, impact player. But as a coach or the guy signing the checks, you have to make sure there's a clear understanding of who's running the asylum. You like him as a player, but he has just enough antics that will drive you nuts. ... I think the Patriots have a big advantage in being able to sit out the first week of the playoffs and



Wannstedt

BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Louis refused to run the ball. ... I don't think **Marshall Faulk** is the blazer he was a couple years ago. He's now just slightly above everybody else instead of being heads and tails above everybody. It just seems like he's running with more power and less slash. The burst is not there, but the patience and the vision are still there. ... **Byron Leftwich** developed nicely this year. He's a big quarterback with a strong arm who can fit balls into places other guys can't. He had some problems with turnovers, which happens with young quarterbacks. But he doesn't let those things bother him. He gets right back under center and makes plays. The one thing he's going to have to work on is his ability to read defenses.

then play a team that will have only one week to prepare for them. There's no coach better in this league than **Bill Belichick** in being able to devise defensive schemes that disrupt the offensive flow of opponents. I think you saw that in the Super Bowl two years ago when he threw seven defensive backs at St. Louis, and St.



LEAGUE LEADERS FINAL

RUSHING

	Atts.	Yds.	Avg.	TDs
J. Lewis, Bal.	387	2066	5.3	14
Green, G.B.	355	1883	5.3	15
Tomlinson, S.D.	313	1645	5.3	13
McAllister, N.O.	351	1641	4.7	8
Portis, Den.	290	1591	5.5	14
F. Taylor, Jac.	345	1572	4.6	6
Davis, Car.	318	1444	4.5	8
Alexander, Sea.	326	1435	4.4	14
Holmes, K.C.	320	1420	4.4	27
R. Williams, Mia.	392	1272	3.5	9
Henry, Buf.	331	1356	4.1	10
C. Martin, NYJ	323	1308	4.0	2
James, Ind.	310	1259	4.1	11
Barber, NYG	278	1216	4.4	2
D. Davis, Hou.	238	1031	4.3	8
George, Ten.	312	1031	3.3	5
Barlow, S.F.	201	1024	5.1	6
Thomas, Chi.	244	1022	4.2	6
Hambright, Dal.	275	972	3.5	5
Ru. Johnson, Cin.	215	957	4.5	9
Shipp, Ariz.	228	830	3.6	0

SCORING — TOUCHDOWNS

	Tot.	Rush.	Pass.	Ret.	Pts.
Holmes, K.C.	27	27	0	0	162
Green, G.B.	20	15	5	0	120
Moss, Min.	17	0	17	0	102
Tomlinson, S.D.	17	13	4	0	102
Alexander, Sea.	16	14	2	0	96
Portis, Den.	14	14	0	0	86
J. Lewis, Bal.	14	14	0	0	84
Westbrook, Phi.	13	7	4	2	78
Holt, S.L.	12	0	12	0	72
Chambers, Mia.	11	0	11	0	66
Duckett, Atl.	11	11	0	0	66
Faulk, S.L.	11	10	1	0	66
Henry, Buf.	11	10	1	0	66
James, Ind.	11	11	0	0	66

SCORING — KICKING

	XP—XPA	FG—FGA	Pts.
J. Wilkins, S.L.	46/46	39/42	163
Vanderjagt, Ind.	46/46	37/37	157
Stover, Bal.	35/35	33/38	134
Kasay, Car.	29/30	32/38	125
Anderson, Ten.	42/42	27/31	123
Elam, Den.	39/39	27/31	120
Longwell, G.B.	51/51	23/26	120
Akers, Phi.	42/42	24/29	114
J. Brown, Sea.	48/48	22/30	114
Vinatieri, N.E.	37/38	25/34	112
M. Andersen, K.C.	58/59	16/20	106
Graham, Cin.	40/40	22/25	106

PASSING

	Att.	Comp.	Pct.	Yds.	Avg. Yd.	TD	Pct.	TD	Pct.	Int.	Pts.
McNair, Ten.	400	250	62.5	3215	8.04	24	6.0	7	1.8	100.4	
Manning, Ind.	566	379	67.0	4267	7.54	29	5.1	10	1.8	99.0	
Culpepper, Min.	454	295	65.0	3479	7.66	25	5.5	11	2.4	96.4	
Green, K.C.	523	330	63.1	4039	7.72	24	4.6	12	2.3	92.6	
Plummer, Den.	302	189	62.6	2182	7.23	15	5.0	7	2.3	91.2	
Favre, G.B.	471	308	65.4	3361	7.14	32	6.8	21	4.5	90.4	
Brooks, N.O.	518	306	59.1	3546	6.85	24	4.6	8	1.5	88.8	
Hasselbeck, Sea.	513	313	61.0	3841	7.49	26	5.1	15	2.9	88.8	
Kirita, Cin.	520	324	62.3	3591	6.91	26	5.0	15	2.9	87.4	
Brady, N.E.	527	317	60.2	3620	6.87	23	4.4	12	2.3	85.9	
Pennington, NYJ	297	189	63.6	2139	7.20	13	4.4	12	4.0	82.9	
B. Johnson, T.B.	570	354	62.1	3811	6.69	26	4.6	21	3.7	81.5	
Bulger, St.L.	532	336	63.2	3845	7.23	22	4.1	22	4.1	81.4	
Delhomme, Car.	449	266	59.2	3219	7.17	19	4.2	16	3.6	80.6	
Garcia, S.F.	392	225	57.4	2704	6.90	18	4.6	13	3.3	80.1	
McNabb, Phil.	478	275	57.5	3216	6.73	16	3.3	11	2.3	79.6	
Ramsey, Was.	337	179	53.1	2166	6.43	14	4.2	9	2.7	75.8	
Maddox, Cle.	519	298	57.4	3414	6.58	18	3.5	17	3.3	75.3	
Holcomb, Pit.	302	193	63.9	1797	5.95	10	3.3	12	4.0	74.6	
Gannon, Oak.	225	125	55.6	1274	5.66	6	2.7	4	1.8	73.5	
Leftwich, Jac.	418	239	57.2	2819	6.74	14	3.3	16	3.8	73.0	
Bledsoe, Buf.	471	274	58.2	2860	6.07	11	2.3	12	2.5	73.0	
Fiedler, Mia.	314	179	57.0	2138	6.81	11	3.5	13	4.1	72.4	
Carter, Dal.	505	292	57.8	3302	6.54	17	3.4	21	4.2	71.4	
Collins, NYG	500	284	56.8	3110	6.22	13	2.6	16	3.2	70.7	
Blake, Ariz.	367	208	56.7	2247	6.12	13	3.5	15	4.1	69.6	
Carr, Hou.	295	167	56.6	2013	6.82	9	3.1	13	4.4	69.5	
D. Johnson, Atl.	243	136	56.0	1655	6.81	8	3.3	12	4.9	67.5	
Brees, S.D.	356	205	57.6	2108	5.92	11	3.1	15	4.2	67.5	
Harrington, Det.	554	309	55.8	2880	5.20	17	3.1	22	4.0	63.9	
Boller, Bal.	224	116	51.8	1260	5.63	7	3.1	9	4.0	62.4	
Stewart, Chi.	251	126	50.2	1418	5.65	7	2.8	12	4.8	56.8	

PUNT RETURNS

	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TDs
Hall, K.C.	29	472	16.3	2
Westbrook, Phi.	20	306	15.3	2
Rossum, Atl.	39	545	14.0	1
Buchanan, Oak.	36	491	13.6	2
Swinton, Det.	24	318	13.3	1
McQuarters, Chi.	37	452	12.2	1
Randle El, Pit.	45	542	12.0	2
Allen, Jac.	27	324	12.0	0
McCareins, Ten.	29	330	11.4	1

PUNTING

	No.	Avg.	Long
Lechler, Oak.	96	46.9	37.2
Sauerbrun, Car.	77	44.6	37.0
Moorman, Buf.	85	44.6	37.1
Berger, N.O.	71	44.3	38.7
Hentrich, Ten.	71	43.9	37.8
Tupa, T.B.	83	43.3	35.9
Knorr, Den.	68	43.2	33.2
Player, Ariz.	82	42.8	34.9

PASS RECEIVING

	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TDs
Holt, S.L.	117	1696	14.5	12
Moss, Min.	111	1632	14.7	17
Boldin, Ariz.	101	1377	13.6	8
Tomlinson, S.D.	100	725	7.3	4
Mason, Ten.	95	1303	13.7	8
Ward, Pit.	95	1163	12.2	10
Harrison, Ind.	94	1272	13.5	10
C. Johnson, Cin.	90	1355	15.1	10
S. Smith, Car.	88	1110	12.6	7
McCardell, T.B.	84	1174	14.0	8
Coles, Was.	82	1204	14.7	6
Owens, S.F.	80	1102	13.8	9
Warrick, Cin.	79	819	10.4	7
Horn, N.O.	78	973	12.5	10
Pittman, T.B.	75	597	8.0	2
Moss, NYJ	74	1105	14.9	10
Smith, Den.	74	845	11.4	3
Holmes, K.C.	74	690	9.3	0
Gonzalez, K.C.	71	916	12.9	10
Boston, S.D.	70	880	12.6	7

TEAM STATISTICS

For rushing and passing, figure is average per game; for punt and kickoff returns, figure is average per return; and for sacks and turnovers, figure is season total. Figure in bold is conference-leading total.

	Rushing		Passing		Yds/Play		KO Ret.		Punt Ret.		Sacks		Turnovers	
	Off.	Def.	Off.	Def.	Off.	Def.	Off.	Def.	Off.	Def.	By	Vs.	Opp.	Own
ARI	95.7	119.7	184.9	224.3	4.6	5.5	22.9	21.7	6.4	11.5	21	44	23	36
ATL	121.8	144.3	150.5	237.5	4.7	5.9	19.9	19.4	14.3	8.6	36	35	31	31
BAL	166.8	96.0	141.3	175.3	4.9	4.2	21.4	21.4	7.7	8.4	47	41	41	38
BUF	104.0	100.4	167.8	169.2	4.4	4.3	21.7	19.6	6.0	11.1	38	51	18	34
CAR	130.9	107.6	190.4	187.7	5.1	4.7	22.4	20.4	10.1	11.5	40	27	26	31
CHI	110.2	116.6	163.6	192.6	4.4	5.0	23.8	21.4	11.8	7.7	18	43	20	29
CIN	124.2	138.6	208.9	212.6	5.1	5.6	19.9	20.7	11.0	8.6	30	37	24	22
CLE	104.4	132.1	177.1	177.9	4.7	5.0	21.1	20.5	8.2	9.6	35	40	22	33
DAL	124.9	89.1	197.6	164.4	4.9	4.3	21.5	21.9	7.6	6.7	32	37	25	29
DEN	164.3	100.3	185.6	176.8	5.3	4.9	22.1	23.0	11.3	12.2	36	25	20	24
DET	83.6	111.4	182.8	223.6	4.4	5.4	22.6	24.8	12.3	6.6	28	11	28	28
GB	159.9	106.3	202.5	212.5	5.8	4.9	23.6	20.8	7.9	9.9	34	19	32	32
HOU	103.2	148.1	165.9	232.0	4.8	5.8	21.3	21.7	6.7	9.5	19	36	22	27
IND	105.9	123.8	261.2	175.6	5.6	5.2	23.6	21.5	7.7	10.0	31	19	30	20
JAC	129.6	87.9	205.3	203.2	5.2	4.8	19.6	21.2	11.1	10.5	24	28	27	31
KC	120.6	146.5	248.8	210.2	5.9	5.4	25.4	23.5	16.4	8.6	36	21	37	18
MIA	113.6	90.8	174.5	208.4	4.8	4.7	21.1	21.5	9.3	6.4	44	31	36	34
MIN	146.4	117.4	246.9	217.3	6.0	5.6	20.1	21.4	6.9	10.7	37	42	35	24
NE	100.4	89.6	214.5	202.0	4.8	4.4	23.4	21.1	9.2	6.3	41	32	41	24
NO	125.0	140.1	214.9	187.1	5.3	5.2	21.2	23.7	9.0	8.2	32	36	27	28
NYG	97.4	119.5	211.4	213.0	4.7	5.0	19.9	20.1	5.1	10.8	46	44	22	38
NYJ	102.2	143.4	207.3	189.1	5.3	5.2	24.4	21.1	11.1	14.6	35	31	20	20
OAK	113.9	156.9	171.9	212.1	4.6	5.7	20.7	25.9	12.9	12.9	25	43	25	26
PHI	125.9	129.4	188.8	202.3	5.3	5.0	21.3	21.5	12.2	7.8	38	43	26	22
PIT	93.0	108.5	206.5	190.4	4.7	4.9	20.7	20.6	12.2	6.4	34	42	25	28
SD	134.1	138.6	188.8	210.9	5.3	5.2	21.5	21.4	8.0	10.8	30	29	20	31
SF	142.4	105.6	213.0	202.4	5.5	5.0	20.7	21.3	6.9	9.2	42	28	37	25
SEA	125.6	109.9	226.1	217.5	5.5	4.9	20.9	20.6	9.4	4.8	40	43	28	29
STL	93.5	123.8	247.6	192.0	5.2	5.2	21.3	23.9	8.6	15.1	42	43	46	39
TB	103.0	109.8	237.8	169.4	5.3	4.6	18.9	23.6	6.9	12.5	36	23	33	31
TEN	101.3	80.9	242.4	225.4	5.4	5.3	19.1	18.5	11.6	9.2	38	25	34	21
WAS	103.4	138.6	187.9	199.7	4.7	5.3	22.5	20.6	9.3	9.8	27	43	30	28

POWER POLL

- 1 Patriots
- 2 Eagles
- 3 Titans
- 4 Chiefs
- 5 Rams
- 6 Colts
- 7 Panthers
- 8 Packers
- 9 Broncos
- 10 Ravens

For the complete Power Poll, go to foxsports.com

SACKS

	Total	Sack Yardage
Strahan, NYG	18.0	119.0
Rice, T.B.	15.0	117.0
Ogunleye, Mia.	15.0	71.0
Taylor, Mia.	13.0	70.0
Little, St.L.	12.5	88.5
Ellis, NYJ	12.5	52.5
Suggs, Bal.	12.0	97.0
Rucker, Car.	12.0	51.5

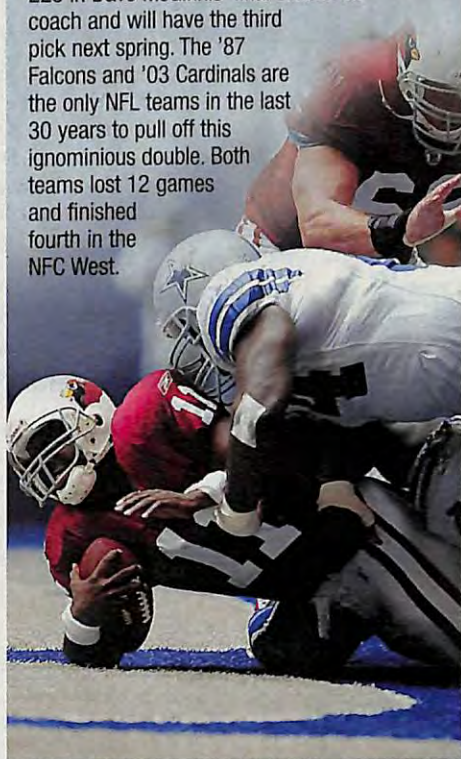
TOTAL YARDS

	Tot.	Rush.	Rec.
Tomlinson, S.D.	2370	1645	725
J. Lewis, Bal.	2271	2066	205
Green, G.B.	2250	1883	367
McAllister, N.O.	2157	1641	516
Holmes, K.C.	2110	1420	690
F. Taylor, Jac.	1942	1572	370
Portis, Den.	1905	1591	314
Alexander, Sea.	1730	1435	295
R. Williams, Mia.	1723	1372	351
Holt, St.L.	1701	5	1696
Barber, NYG	1677	1216	461
Moss, Min.	1650	18	1632
Davis, Car.	1603	1444	159
C. Martin, NYJ	1570	1308	262
James, Ind.	1551	1259	292
Henry, Buf.	1514	1356	158
Boldin, Ariz.	1417	40	1377

Stats provided by STATS Inc.

TSNnumber 16

Seasons since a team finished last in the NFL in both points scored and points allowed, as the Cardinals did this season. In 1987, Atlanta was outscored 436-205 in the first year of Marion Campbell's second stint as Falcons coach—and wound up with the first pick in the '88 draft. The Cardinals were outscored 452-225 in Dave McGinnis' final season as coach and will have the third pick next spring. The '87 Falcons and '03 Cardinals are the only NFL teams in the last 30 years to pull off this ignominious double. Both teams lost 12 games and finished fourth in the NFC West.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

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TSN SCOREBOARD

	AFC EAST				AFC NORTH				AFC SOUTH				AFC WEST			
	NE	MIA	BUF	NYJ	BAL	CIN	PIT	CLE	IND	TEN	JAC	HOU	KC	DEN	OAK	SD
W-L	14-2	10-6	6-10	6-10	10-6	8-8	6-10	5-11	12-4	12-4	5-11	5-11	13-3	10-6	4-12	4-12
Pct.	.875	.625	.375	.375	.625	.500	.375	.313	.750	.750	.313	.313	.813	.625	.250	.250
PF	348	311	243	283	391	346	300	254	447	435	276	255	484	381	270	313
PA	238	261	279	299	281	384	327	322	336	324	331	380	332	301	379	441
Div.	5-1	4-2	2-4	1-5	4-2	3-3	3-3	2-4	5-1	4-2	2-4	1-5	5-1	5-1	1-5	1-5
AFC	11-1	7-5	4-8	6-6	7-5	6-6	5-7	3-9	9-3	8-4	3-9	3-9	10-2	9-3	3-9	2-10
WEEK																
1	at Buf	HOU	NE	at Was†	at Pit	DEN	BAL	IND	at Cle	OAK	at Car	at Mia	SD	at Cin	at Ten	at KC
2	at Phi	at NYJ	at Jac	MIA	CLE	at Oak	at KC	at Bal	TEN	at Ind	BUF	at NO	PIT	at SD	CIN	DEN
3	NYJ	BUF	at Mia	at NE	at SD	PIT	at Cin	at SF	JAC	NO	at Ind	KC	at Hou	OAK*	at Den*	BAL
4	at Was	Open	PHI	DAL	KC	at Cle	TEN	CIN	at NO	at Pit	at Hou	JAC	at Bal	DET	SD	at Oak
5	TEN	at NYG	CIN	Open	Open	at Buf	CLE	at Pit	at TB*	at NE	SD	Open	DEN	at KC	at Chi	at Jac
6	NYG	at Jac	at NYJ	BUF	at Ari	Open	at Den	OAK	CAR	HOU	MIA	at Ten	at GB	PIT	at Cle	Open
7	at Mia	NE	WAS	at Hou	at Cin	BAL	Open	SD	Open	at Car	Open	NYJ	at Oak*	at Min	KC*	at Cle
8	CLE	at SD*	at KC	at Phi	DEN	SEA	STL	at NE	HOU	at Jac	TEN	at Ind	BUF	at Bal	Open	MIA*
9	at Den*	IND	Open	NYG	JAC	at Ari	at Sea	Open	at Mia	Open	at Bal	CAR	Open	NE*	at Det	at Chi
10	Open	at Ten	at Dal	at Oak	at STL	HOU	ARI	at KC	at Jac	MIA	IND	at Cin	CLE	Open	NYJ	MIN
11	DAL	BAL	HOU	at Ind	at Mia	KC	at SF*	ARI	NYJ	JAC	at Ten	at Buf	at Cin	SD	MIN	at Den
12	at Hou	WAS	IND	JAC	SEA	at SD	at Cle	PIT	at Buf	at Atl	at NYJ	NE	OAK	CHI	at KC	CIN
13	at Ind	at Dal‡	at NYG	TEN*	SF	at Pit	CIN	at Sea	NE	at NYJ*	TB	ATL	at SD	at Oak	DEN	KC
14	MIA	at NE	NYJ	at Buf	CIN	at Bal	OAK	STL*	at Ten	IND	HOU	at Jac	at Den	KC	at Pit	at Det
15	JAC	PHI*	at Ten	PIT	at Oak	SF	at NYJ	at Den	ATL	BUF	at NE	at TB	DET	CLE	BAL	GB
16	at NYJ‡	at Buf	MIA	NE‡	at Cle	at STL	SD	BAL	DEN	at Hou	NO	TEN	at Min‡	at Ind	GB*	at Pit
17	BUF‡	NYJ	at NE‡	at Mia	PIT	CLE	at Bal	at Cin	at Hou	TB	at Atl	IND	CHI	at GB	at SD	OAK

Win Loss * Monday † Thursday ‡ Saturday § Thanksgiving Day



BRIAN BALDINGER

Gaps in action can kill home-field edge

When I played for the Eagles in 1992, we went to Dallas for a divisional playoff game. I played left guard, and though I was right near him, I never heard Randall Cunningham call a signal all day. The Dallas crowd was so noisy, the best I could do was keep one eye on the ball, the other on the tackle I had to block, and wait for the snap. We scored 10 points and lost.

Don't let anyone tell you home field doesn't matter in the playoffs. It does, especially to offensive linemen. When you can't hear, you lose the advantage of knowing the snap count. You're slower off the ball, and you're not as strong as you'd like because you start every play with some indecision and doubt. You're never really in attack mode.

Psychologically, the crowd can be such a boost for the home team. The roar gets the adrenaline

pumping so much that you feel like you have a reserve energy tank. If you're the visitor, the crowd can sap some of that energy out of you.

I'm well aware that home-field advantage doesn't always translate to wins. I've seen the Bucs win in Philadelphia, the Patriots win in Pittsburgh and the Falcons win in Minnesota the past few years.

There are reasons for this recent trend.

One is parity. With the talent level of teams more even than it used to be, one big play is more likely to turn a game around. Joe Jurevicius' long sideline reception was that kind of play for the Bucs during the NFC championship game in Philly last year. The emotion in the Vet escaped

Jurevicius



CHRIS GARDNER / AP

like air from a balloon.

A bigger reason is stopping play—particularly commercials and instant replay, which wasn't even an issue not long ago. Any time the action stops, fans are taken out of the game. They get tired of getting up and down. Instant replay can be a real crowd killer. Some reviews drag on so long that I think coaches sometimes use a challenge to deflate the crowd. It's like a coaching strategy.

Having the 12th man is great, but with all the breaks in the action, it ain't what it used to be.

S Brian Baldinger, an offensive lineman for 12 NFL seasons, can be heard on Sporting News Radio and seen on FOX Sports. Listen online at <http://radio.sportingnews.com>.

DRAFTWATCH

By DAN POMPEI

Running backs

1. Steven Jackson*, 6-0, 227, Oregon State. A big, powerful runner with vision, toughness and balance. Makes yards after contact. More of a move-the-chains guy than a big-play threat.

2. Kevin Jones*, 6-0, 215, Virginia Tech. Highly athletic and has speed. Can make tacklers miss. Finds the holes. Hands and inside running ability are questionable.

3. Carnell Williams*, 5-11, 199, Auburn. Has unusual quickness and toughness, like Warrick Dunn. Shows vision and great burst. But can he catch the ball?

4. Greg Jones, 6-1, 251, Florida State. A power back with speed. Has not yet shown he is the runner he was before two knee surgeries.

5. Chris Perry, 6-0, 225, Michigan. An instinctive, strong runner with quick feet and good balance. Can catch. Has average speed.

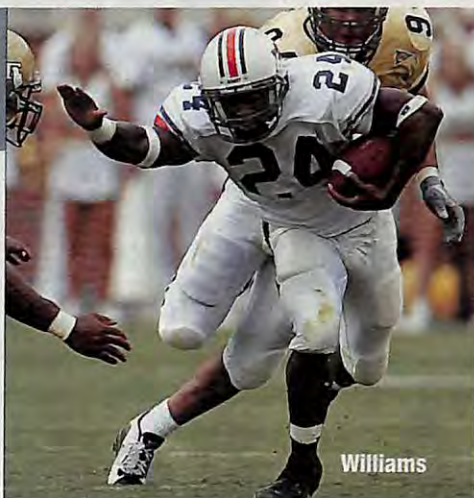
6. Julius Jones, 5-10, 205, Notre Dame. Came on strong as a senior. Has quickness and runs hard. Has good hands. Is smaller than the ideal.

7. Michael Turner, 5-10, 228, Northern Illinois. Has strong legs and gains yards after the first hit. Plays with balance. Isn't real fast or elusive.

8. Clarence Farmer, 5-11, 220, Arizona. One of the most gifted backs in the draft. Has speed, instincts, vision and balance. Has some character issues.

9. Quincy Wilson, 5-11, 214, West Virginia. A tough, dependable runner with great vision. Speed is a question. Son of former Bears LB Otis Wilson.

10. Mewelde Moore, 5-10, 210, Tulane. A controlled runner with patience and vision but average speed. An excellent receiver.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

11. Cedric Cobbs, 6-0, 221, Arkansas. Can find the crease and burst through it. Has the strength to break tackles. Has some off-the-field issues.

12. Bruce Perry, 5-9, 196, Maryland. A talented, productive runner with vision and strength. Runs hard. Lack of size and durability will hurt.

13. Ran Carthon, 6-0, 212, Florida. Physical runner with quick feet. Is versatile enough to be a multipurpose fullback. Lacks great speed.

14. Jason Geathers, 6-2, 200, Miami. Switched from receiver to running back this season, and his NFL future is as a backup. Great athlete, great hands.

15. Tatum Bell, 5-11, 204, Oklahoma State. A speed back who can turn the corner. Has average vision and strength. Won't make tacklers miss.

**Not a senior*



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<http://ultimate.sportingnews.com/nfl/draft>.



By TODD McSHAY
of The War Room

LSU's **Corey Webster** has been granted an extra year of eligibility, but he's not likely to use it. Webster, who began his college career as a wide receiver before moving to cornerback, has improved every season and became a solid man-to-man cover corner in coach **Nick Saban's** aggressive scheme, which often leaves its cornerbacks on an island. Webster has good, not great, size and speed and could develop into a very good No. 3 corner in the NFL, or possibly a solid No. 2. ... Ohio State junior CB **Chris Gamble**, who declared for the draft last weekend, is loaded with athleticism and speed but is very inconsistent in coverage, mainly because of suspect recognition skills. Gamble likely will be a mid-first round pick, but the team that drafts him will have to have patience because he's not nearly ready to start right away, as **Terence Newman** and **Marcus Trufant** were a year ago. ... We were surprised by Stanford DT **Amon Gordon's** decision to declare for the draft. Though Gordon (6-3, 283) has lots of potential, he never came close to reaching it in college. If he has a terrific post-season, Gordon could move up into the late second round or early third, but he is not polished or proven enough to be drafted any higher than that. ... Marshall RB **Butchie Wallace** was the star of the Blue-Gray All-Star Classic, but it is doubtful he'll be drafted. Wallace played little at Marshall because of injuries (ankle, leg, back, hand, concussion) that prevented him from showcasing his talents. If nothing else, his Blue-Gray performance may win him an NFL tryout as an undrafted free agent next summer.



BALTIMORE RAVENS

STAYING TOGETHER: The team signed NT **Kelly Gregg** to a five-year contract extension. The move was good because it let veteran players know the intent is to keep this team together. Gregg plays the run well but isn't a great pass rusher. ... New owner **Steve Bisciotti** might push coach **Brian Billick** to hire a new offensive coordinator. The offense has struggled, especially at quarterback. The Ravens have shown little imagination and lack a short, controlled passing game. ... Backup QB **Anthony Wright**, who started the last eight games, regressed in the final five and might have competition as **Kyle Boller's** backup. Wright didn't look off receivers and made several poor decisions.

OFFSEASON GAME PLAN: The team must find a legitimate No. 1 receiver, and it must be a free agent because the team doesn't have a first-round draft pick. The club also might try to pick up a backup quarterback such as **Ty Detmer** or **Neil O'Donnell**—a guy who won't mind tutoring a youngster such as Boller while vying for a Super Bowl ring. The team has 15 unrestricted free agents, and the top priorities to re-sign are C **Mike Flynn**, DE **Marques Douglas**, K **Matt Stover** and CB **Chris McAlister**. —Mike Preston



CINCINNATI BENGALS

CALLING ON CARSON: Coach **Marvin Lewis'** refusal to name QB **Jon Kitna** the starter heading into spring minicamp means **Carson Palmer** will be given a chance to win the job. Kitna is coming off career highs for touchdown passes (26), yards (3,591), completion rate (62.3 percent) and passer rating (87.4), but the team still missed the playoffs. And if the perception in the locker room is that 8-8 or 9-7 is the best Kitna can deliver, then it's wise to give the gifted Palmer a shot. This is a critical offseason for Palmer, who still needs to fully absorb the playbook and learn the offense. When he does, he'll start.

GOOD RIDDANCE: RB **Corey Dillon** infuriated teammates by tossing his gear into the stands after the season-ending loss to the Browns, as a way of saying goodbye. But the team will have a hard time trading Dillon because of his contract, age (29) and the pounding he has taken over seven seasons. If the team can't trade Dillon, he will be released. ... Changes are coming on the interior of the offensive line, but RG **Mike Goff** should be brought back. Goff, a free agent, is a skilled run blocker who showed more consistency in pass protection this season. He also can play center. —Chick Ludwig



DENVER BRONCOS

ROOM TO IMPROVE: The team missed the hustle and aggressive play of S **Nick Ferguson**, who missed the playoffs because of a broken wrist. Look for some changes in the secondary. Denver had nine interceptions this season, last in the league for the second straight year. ... TE **Shannon Sharpe** likely has played his final game, meaning the team needs to find another go-to receiver. WR **Rod Smith** still is one of QB **Jake Plummer's** prime targets, but with Sharpe gone and WR **Ed McCaffrey** pondering retirement, the team needs new blood in the passing game. WR **Ashley Lelie** has talent, but he must prove he can make the tough catch over the middle.

OFFSEASON GAME PLAN: The Broncos' top priority must be to re-sign MLB **Al Wilson**. He is the team's best tackler and its emotional leader. WLB **Ian Gold** is coming back from a knee injury, and with the future of OLB **John Mobley** (neck injury) in question, it's vital the Broncos get Wilson back. The team also needs to add an impact defensive tackle and a backup quarterback. Don't be surprised if the club goes after a cornerback in the draft despite its bad draft history at the position. —Patrick Saunders



INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

SIMPLE FORMULA: The No. 1 priority against the Chiefs should be to keep QB **Peyton Manning** upright and active. With time to make his reads, he gets the ball to the proper receiver. He was barely touched by the Broncos on Sunday, and he completed 22 of 26 passes. ... The ground game will be a key. Kansas City has been susceptible to the run, ranking 30th in yards per game (146.5). RB **Edgerrin James** has rushed for at least 88 yards in six of the last eight games. Manning, with his play-action ability, is most dangerous when the running game is effective.

NEXT ASSIGNMENT: After holding **Clinton Portis** to 68 yards in 17 carries, the run defense has to muster a suitable encore for RB **Priest Holmes**. He has the type of cut-back ability and speed that has given the team trouble this season. ... Arrowhead Stadium is one of the toughest places to play in the league, but the Colts have won in their last four trips there. The team's success on the road—it was 7-1 this season—can be traced to the veterans on offense. Manning's experience and expertise allow him to run coordinator **Tom Moore's** offense even in a hostile environment. —Mike Chappell



BUFFALO BILLS

COACHING SEARCH: The team's next coach likely will have an offensive background. President-G.M. **Tom Donahoe** preferred a defensive-minded coach and hired **Gregg Williams** three years ago. Williams molded the Bills into an elite defensive team, but the offense was among the league's worst in 2003. Offensive coordinators **Mike Sheppard** and **Kevin Gilbride** both ran predictable attacks that didn't fit the personnel. The team has few weapons on offense, but it needs a coach who can make the most of them. ... The next coach must rebuild QB **Drew Bledsoe's** confidence. He is still a talented passer who can make plays in a system that doesn't require him to carry an offense by himself.

CAUTION WILL PAY OFF: The team was wise to resist using rookie RB **Willis McGahee**. He appears to be fully recovered from knee surgery, but risking a setback would have been foolish. He will have some rust but should be 100 percent in 2004. ... Rookie CB **Terrence McGee** could challenge for a starting job. CB **Antoine Winfield** is an unrestricted free agent, and his asking price might be too high. McGee has solid ball skills and impressed coaches with his instincts and ability to make plays. —Allen Wilson



CLEVELAND BROWNS

REVAMPING THE STAFF: The team faces an important offseason decision with the hiring of a new offensive coordinator. Coach **Butch Davis** wants to develop a strong running game, but deposed coordinator **Bruce Arians** never seemed to grasp that desire. Davis will look for someone with a running mind-set and may hire three coaches from the same staff because he also needs a quarterbacks and running backs coach. The team had success with the defensive coaching trio it hired from Dallas last year: coordinator **Dave Campo**, line coach **Andre Patterson** and linebackers coach **Clancy Pendergast**.

RUNNING BACKS CONTROVERSY? With the way rookie RB **Lee Suggs** performed in the season finale, there is speculation he could challenge RB **William Green** in 2004. Green has just as much power as Suggs, who is excellent running between the tackles. But Green is faster and has an extra gear. Green, however, needs to get his head on straight. ... If Davis is serious about providing veteran leadership, he'll see to it that LB **Brant Boyer** and OL **Barry Stokes** are re-signed. They fill a variety of roles as starters and backups and are almost like extra coaches. —Steve King



HOUSTON TEXANS

KEY PIECES: The team has a tenuous defensive line situation. Free-agent NT **Seth Payne** had complications after ACL surgery and will not be at full strength in camp. DE **Gary Walker**, who played in only four games because of injury, will be allowed to become a free agent if the Texans can't renegotiate his contract. The absences of Payne and Walker made the line the team's weakest unit, so it's important for Houston to bring back at least one of the two veteran leaders next season. ... Coach **Dom Capers** likely will decide the team didn't use WR **Corey Bradford** enough. Playing in a platoon with WR **Jabar Gaffney**, Bradford averaged 19.2 yards per catch but had only 24 catches.

WANTS AND NEEDS: The team must decide if RT **Greg Randall** is a stop-gap solution until rookie **Seth Wand** is ready or if Randall is the long-term answer. The Texans would be wise to keep Randall. As they learned during an injury-riddled inaugural season, a team never can have enough healthy offensive linemen. ... The Texans covet University of Miami FS **Sean Taylor**, who is the kind of playmaker the team needs. FS **Marion McCree** is solid but hasn't established himself as an impact player. —Carlton Thompson



JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

BIG DISAPPOINTMENT: The team is mulling its options at defensive end after **Hugh Douglas** proved so disappointing in his first season with the Jaguars. Douglas, a perennial Pro Bowl pick with the Eagles, had just 3½ sacks. He also had a poor attitude. Although the team gave him a \$6 million signing bonus last winter, releasing him after June 1 wouldn't do serious damage to the salary cap. ... The team's No. 9 overall pick in the draft probably will be too low to secure the top receiver it covets. A more likely choice might be University of Miami TE **Kellen Winslow**, who would give QB **Byron Leftwich** a go-to target. Picking Winslow likely would end TE **Kyle Brady's** stint with Jacksonville because the team already has rookie TE **George Wrihster**.

SECONDARY FIRST: The team has decisions to make in the secondary. There was interest in retaining unrestricted free agent CB **Fernando Bryant** until he publicly criticized the team in December. Now, it's unlikely Bryant even will get an offer. SS **Donovin Darius** is eager to test his value on the free-agent market, but the Jaguars might decide to make him their franchise player for the second straight year. —Bart Hubbuch



KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

SPARKING THE RUSH: The key to an improved pass rush against QB Peyton Manning and the Colts rests with DEs R-Kal Truluck and Gary Stills. Both were used in passing situations in the season finale and produced impressive results. Truluck and Stills are speed rushers whose techniques aren't textbook, but they are more than capable of giving tackles problems, particularly in loud Arrowhead Stadium. Truluck and Stills must be used judiciously, however, because they are liabilities against the run. ... The team needs at least two takeaways against the Colts. Otherwise, it could be a long day because the Chiefs aren't strong enough defensively to consistently get the Colts off the field.

RED STORM: The offense needs to take advantage of a Colts defense that has not been strong in the red zone. The Chiefs were the NFL's most efficient red zone team because RB Priest Holmes and the blocking unit work so well together and TE Tony Gonzalez is so difficult to match up against in the end zone. ... Dick Vermeil's announcement that he will return for another year should give the team an emotional lift. Uncertainty over his future had been a distraction. That's no longer the case. —Adam Teicher



NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

SECOND TO NONE: The Patriots begin postseason play with the best secondary. CB Tyrone Poole and nickel back Asante Samuel are fast, Ss Rodney Harrison and Eugene Wilson are physical, and CB Ty Law is excellent overall. The team led the league with 29 interceptions and 11 touchdowns allowed in 2003. Opponents converted on third downs 34.5 percent of the time. ... Statistically, the ground game is much like the one that won the title after the 2001 season; the number of attempts, 473, is the same. The difference is RBs Antowain Smith and Kevin Faulk shared the load. Also, Smith was more of a red zone threat in 2001. Overall, the 2003 club is less bruising on the ground.

A MATTER OF CONTROL: OTs Matt Light and Tom Ashworth did an excellent job against Titans DEs Jevon Kearse and Kevin Carter in the clubs' regular-season game; the Patriots had 161 rushing yards and controlled the line of scrimmage in the win. If they can do it again, they can win again. ... Tennessee is the top run-stuffing team, but it's susceptible to the pass. The onus is on the offense to spread the field and see whether QB Tom Brady can expose the secondary. —Michael Felger



OAKLAND RAIDERS

IT'S HIS TIME: The retirement of Lincoln Kennedy clears the way for RT Langston Walker, whose size (6-8, 345), strength and agility should allow him to handle any type of defensive end. Some have even predicted greatness for him. But Walker first must learn the nuances of the game. ... The team faces key decisions regarding QB Rich Gannon, who is coming off shoulder surgery and scheduled to make \$7 million next season, and CB Charles Woodson, who could become one of the game's highest-paid players. Look for both to be back, especially since the team is in good salary-cap shape.

MOVING ON? DT Rod Coleman wants out. He isn't happy with the way he has been used, the defensive scheme or the organization's dysfunctional ways. The team could trade or release Coleman without taking much of a salary-cap hit, but that would be a mistake. Coleman is a talented player with good pass-rush ability (16½ sacks the past two seasons). He lacks the size (6-2, 285) to be an every-down player, but his speed and strength allow him to dominate in the right situations. The team already is thin along the defensive line, so it needs to find a way to appease Coleman. —Steve Corkran



SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

NO VACATION: RG Toniou Fonoti was supposed to be a building block of the team after being a second-round pick in 2002, but he struggled with defensive stunts as a rookie, then missed this season with foot problems. Fonoti (6-4, 349) can be a powerful drive blocker, but his weight has hurt his lateral movement. The team wants to see a commitment to offseason conditioning from Fonoti. ... P Darren Bennett may have played his final game with the team. Mike Scifres struggled as the kickoff specialist this season, but he has a big leg and is viewed as the punter of the future.

ON THE RISE: TE Antonio Gates showed big-play potential as a rookie, despite relying almost exclusively on pure athletic ability since he was playing football for the first time since high school after starring in basketball in college. Gates still is learning defensive concepts and how to run routes properly, but once he is able to react more instead of think, he will become a consistent weapon in the passing game. ... LE Marcellus Wiley needs to get stronger and develop a second move to go with his outside speed rush, which often is negated when quarterbacks take short drops. —Jim Trotter



MIAMI DOLPHINS

REGIME CHANGE: The new general manager will have to make some critical decisions, such as whether to stick with QB Jay Fiedler as a starter, whether to re-sign either LE Adewale Ogunleye or RT Todd Wade and how to address the team's offensive line problems. Coach Dave Wannstedt and the G.M. are supposed to share power, so they must agree on whether to invest in a young quarterback and other personnel moves. ... Fiedler took steps backward and was injured again this season. Backup Brian Griese is merely mediocre. No. 3 Sage Rosenfels is a long shot to be anything more than a good No. 2. The best hope for the Dolphins is that a veteran such as Mark Brunell or Kurt Warner will be available. More likely, the team, which has the 20th overall pick, will select a quarterback such as Philip Rivers of N.C. State.

INVESTMENT OPTIONS: Ogunleye, who had a career-high 15 sacks, wants a big payday. The Dolphins will give him the franchise tag so they can get a first- and third-round pick if he leaves. The dilemma is deciding whether to take the picks to rebuild the offense or to keep a budding star who complements RE Jason Taylor. —Jason Cole



NEW YORK JETS

COACHING CHANGES: Almost the entire defensive staff, including coordinator Ted Cottrell, was fired, but offensive coordinator Paul Hackett likely is safe. He probably will be forced to make changes, though. Coach Herman Edwards won't call plays, but he will take a more hands-on approach and will push Hackett to be more aggressive. If Edwards demands more downfield passing, it would be a mistake. That isn't QB Chad Pennington's forte. What the offense needs most is a complement to WR Santana Moss.

MORE AGGRESSIVENESS: The top candidates to replace Cottrell are former Bills coach Gregg Williams and Bucs line coach Rod Marinelli. Edwards wants a more aggressive scheme, which would make Williams a better fit because he is an advocate of man coverage and creative blitzes. Marinelli is a disciple of the zone-oriented cover 2. But Edwards used to work with Marinelli. ... RG Brandon Moore, a former defensive lineman, is being projected to start in 2004 after a strong showing late in the season. Moore is powerful yet quick. Incumbent Brent Smith is a free agent. He still could be re-signed to compete on the left side, but the team won't spend big at guard. —Rich Cimini



PITTSBURGH STEELERS

UNCERTAIN GROUND: After a strong finish, it seemed likely RB Jerome Bettis would return, but coach Bill Cowher has been noncommittal. Bettis would restructure his contract so he could finish his career in Pittsburgh, but the team must determine how much Bettis has left. He turns 32 next month, and his body has taken a pounding because of his physical running style. It's almost certain the team won't bring back Bettis and Amos Zereoue, who lost the starting job midway through this season.

HE'LL BE BACK: There was speculation C Jeff Hartings would retire after experiencing problems with his surgically repaired knee early this season, but it improved and now he wants to play at least two more years. Hartings, who is known for his run blocking, played well at season's end, when he had confidence in his knee. ... CB Deshaea Townsend, who took Dewayne Washington's job during the season, showed an ability to be a playmaker, which is something the secondary has been lacking. Townsend gets good positioning and has a nose for the ball. He also held up in run support, despite being 5-10, 190 pounds. If Washington returns, it will be as a reserve. —Gerry Dulac



TENNESSEE TITANS

ON HIS GAME: Third-year CB Andre Dyson has had his best season. He has been more aggressive in coverage and isn't giving as much cushion. Dyson plays slant routes particularly well and, despite his size (5-10, 187), is a willing run defender. He matches up well against the Patriots' wideouts, most of whom are small. ... A key against the Patriots will be to sustain the productive running game that helped beat Baltimore. QB Steve McNair needs more room to work, and a solid running game would slow down the Pats' pass rush. RB Eddie George (shoulder) will play, and look for rookie Chris Brown to get significant work. Against the Ravens, Brown was decisive and ran with confidence.

NO PICKS: Turnovers are the biggest reason the Titans have been bounced out of the playoffs in recent years. That problem almost beat them again Saturday, when McNair threw three interceptions. He needs to regain his patience, a key against the Patriots' complex scheme. Quarterbacks tend to get frustrated against New England and force throws; McNair can't let that happen. He had a 391-yard passing game in the Titans' loss at New England in Week 5, but an interception ended the team's comeback bid. —Jeff Legwold



ARIZONA CARDINALS

GETTING THE RIGHT GUY: Picking the right defensive line coach will be one of the most important jobs for the new coach. Team management thinks it has talent in the front four but that it hasn't been developed. DL **Wendell Bryant**, a first-round pick in 2002 who has alternated between tackle and end, has been set back by nagging injuries. Bryant does everything asked of him but needs a coach who can motivate him to be something more than average. RE **Calvin Pace**, this year's first-rounder, has considerable athletic skills and needs to learn how to take advantage of them.

COMPETITION FOR CLEMENT: RT **Anthony Clement**, who didn't play well most of the season, likely will face competition for his starting job. Clement is a decent run blocker and can handle power rushers, but he has problems with speed rushers beating him to the outside. There isn't anyone on the roster expected to contend for the job, so it's an area the team should address in the offseason. ... **Nate Poole** played well enough in the last four games to nail down a spot as the fourth or fifth receiver in 2004. He has average speed but is a solid route runner and has very good hands. —*Kent Somers*



CAROLINA PANTHERS

THE RIGHT MOVE: Resting RB **Stephen Davis** late in the regular season was one of the team's smartest moves. He's healthier than he has been since midseason, and it was evident in the victory against Dallas. When he runs well, the team can use play-action to set up deep throws. ... WR **Muhsin Muhammad** has come on strong in the last month after a very slow start. Muhammad's re-emergence makes the passing game much more dangerous because defenses can't focus as much on WR **Steve Smith**. The two could have key roles Saturday because the Rams don't have a shutdown corner.

PRESSURE POINT: The secondary will have a big challenge matching up against Rams WRs **Torry Holt** and **Isaac Bruce**. The best way to stop them is to get in the face of QB **Marc Bulger**, who has struggled against blitzes. The front four needs to get consistent pressure, but look for the team to also mix in more linebacker blitzes. ... Though veteran CB **Terry Cousin** is healthy after late-season injury problems, he has been replaced in the lineup by rookie **Ricky Manning**. The coaches are pleased with Manning's aggressive play, and he should be a full-time starter next season. —*Pat Yasinskas*



DALLAS COWBOYS

MORE SACKS: The team finished the regular season with 32 sacks, the most in three years. But it still doesn't have a legitimate pass rusher who can apply pressure in key situations. Until it does, the defense will struggle. ... QB **Quincy Carter** is expected to go into camp as the starter. But look for Dallas to add a young backup with experience. The team is looking at **Ricky Ray**, who led the Edmonton Eskimos to the CFL title.

OFFSEASON GAME PLAN: The Cowboys will have about \$16 million under the salary cap. WR **Joey Galloway** is the only player Dallas is considering releasing because of his impact on the cap. The team has just three unrestricted free agents—C **Gennaro DiNapoli**, DE **Ebenezer Ekuban** and CB **Mario Edwards**—and it would like to retain all three at the right price. But it views Ekuban and Edwards as key reserves on a playoff team and likely eventually will want to upgrade at their positions. The team could opt to draft a running back early or it could trade for Bengals RB **Corey Dillon** or Jets RB **Curtis Martin**. The Cowboys also will try to acquire a pass-rushing defensive end, a cornerback and a right guard or right tackle. —*Jean-Jacques Taylor*



GREEN BAY PACKERS

ANOTHER LAYER: CB **Al Harris** has added a physical dimension to the defense because of his love of bump-and-run coverage. Without his ability to knock receivers off their routes, he probably wouldn't survive in the NFL because his speed isn't that great. But he plays bigger than he is. Harris has given up some big gains this year, but he is a better tackler than his predecessor, **Tyrone Williams**, and his ability to play bump coverage allows coordinator **Ed Donatelli** to call blitzes when he wants to.

HOLD ON TO THE BALL: RB **Ahman Green** set a club record with 192 rushing yards when the team played the Eagles on November 10, but he had two fumbles (one lost). Since then, Green has not fumbled. If he can run the ball and hold on to it, the blitz threat will be removed and QB **Brett Favre** will be able to throw off play-action. Favre also must be able to diagnose the blitz and alter his protections. He must not force the ball into coverage and will have to throw it away at times. ... The defense must contain QB **Donovan McNabb** in the pocket. Athletic MLB **Nick Barnett** can shadow McNabb if necessary, and DE **Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila** must apply pressure. —*Tom Silverstein*



ATLANTA FALCONS

BOOST NEEDED: No part of the roster will face more scrutiny than the secondary. LCB **Juran Bolden** makes spectacular plays, but his injury history makes him suspect, and he likely will become an unrestricted free agent. RCB **Tod McBride** is not an ideal starter, and LCB **Ray Buchanan** probably won't be back. **Derek Ross** could win a starting spot at right cornerback if the team spends money at other positions.

HELP WANTED: The team will draft seventh or eighth in the first round and should take an offensive or defensive lineman who can contribute right away. QB **Michael Vick** showed in 2002 that he doesn't need a Pro Bowl line to help him move the offense, so that pick would be best spent on the defensive side. Signing a free-agent quarterback to fill the No. 2 spot will be a high priority. The team might also sign a third-string quarterback because **Doug Johnson** likely won't return and **Kurt Kittner** is inadequate. ... NT **Ed Jasper** plans to return, and the team could move E **Travis Hall** back inside if it goes with a 4-3. That would leave LE **Patrick Kerney** and RE **Brady Smith** as starters on the outside, but Atlanta needs a backup who can play both sides. —*George Henry*



CHICAGO BEARS

FIRST THINGS FIRST: The team is going to be cautious in treating QB **Rex Grossman's** finger injury and will try to let it heal naturally before opting for surgery. The ability to develop Grossman will be something the team looks for in its new coach. ... G.M. **Jerry Angelo** says the team needs an upgrade on offense and to score more points. Nonetheless, he interviewed four defensive coordinators—**Romeo Crennel**, **Lovie Smith**, **Jim Mora Jr.** and **Mike Nolan**—to begin his coaching search.

NEXT ON THE LIST: After it hires a coach, the team will look to fill other holes. The club will have between \$8 million and \$12 million available under the salary cap and currently has eight picks in the April draft that should grow to nine or 10. Still, the money is there to use at any position the team desires, and there could be a big-name signing if a left tackle or pass rusher hits the market. The interior defensive line could use an upgrade. DT **Keith Traylor** is likely to get a one-year offer, but he will weigh that against the free-agent market. The Bears also could make a play for a cornerback even though they like their combination at that position. —*Mike Mulligan*



DETROIT LIONS

BACKFIELD NEED: The Lions were impressed by rookie RB **Artose Pinner**, but president **Matt Millen** will try to draft a back. Virginia Tech's **Kevin Jones** is a possibility with the club's top pick, the sixth overall. RB **James Stewart** is due a bonus in March and isn't expected to return. ... DE **Kalimba Edwards** will have his second hernia surgery in a six-month span. Edwards had the operation last summer, missed training camp and was nagged by the condition all season. Edwards, who finished his rookie season strong, didn't take a step forward in his second season.

MOLDING THE STAFF: Coach **Steve Mariucci** will make changes in the coaching staff that will bring out the toughness he wants in the West Coast offense. Mariucci hopes to win a bidding war for 49ers offensive line coach **Pat Morris**, and it's possible the Lions will make former TE **Charlie Sanders**, an excellent, hard-nosed teacher who doesn't tolerate subpar efforts, their receivers coach. ... The club is looking for a new defensive line coach who is a strong teacher of pass-rushing techniques. It's possible the team will hire a new assistant for the line and a pass-rushing specialist. —*Tom Kowalski*



MINNESOTA VIKINGS

TOUGH MOSS: WR **Randy Moss** is criticized for not always playing hard, but his critics don't realize how often he plays through pain. Moss played with a sore left heel through December and battled injuries in his back most of the season. Still, the coaching staff couldn't get Moss off the practice field, and he has a reputation with teammates as one of the Vikings' toughest players. ... The team failed to take advantage of its lack of injuries. WLB **Chris Claiborne** was the only starter who missed more than two games. He missed four because of a heel injury but will be fine for minicamps.

BAD MEMORIES: The team and coaching staff must quickly turn their focus to next season after a deflating loss in the finale. Minnesota's 3-0 finish in 2002 was a springboard for a lively 2003 offseason program and training camp that led to a 6-0 start. The Vikings must not let their doldrums continue in the offseason programs. ... Coach **Mike Tice** will put particular emphasis on not playing down to the competition next season. The Vikings were 4-2 against teams with winning records but lost four games against the NFL's four worst teams, all with 4-12 records. —*Bill Williamson*



NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

TO-DO LIST: Signing free-agent RE **Darren Howard** is the top offseason priority. Howard has been the team's best lineman and has matured into a solid leader in the locker room. The young defense can't afford to lose a player with his talent, leadership skills and potential. ... C **Jerry Fontenot** would like to return if the club wants him back. The 15-year veteran enjoyed a solid season and remains an offensive leader. However, the Saints have invested draft picks on Gs **LeCharles Bentley** and **Montrae Holland** and recently signed G **Kendyl Jacob** to a three-year extension. Bentley is the most likely candidate to take over at center. Fontenot could fill a reserve role, but he may be unwilling to do so after starting for most of his career.

TIME FOR A CHANGE: Assistant coaches **Sam Clancy** (defensive line) and **Hubbard Alexander** (wide receivers) were not retained after poor seasons by their position groups. The wide receivers dropped passes and often were guilty of missed alignments and poor route running. The defensive line was hampered by inexperience and injuries. Expect the new coaches to be experienced, no-nonsense types. —Jeff Duncan



NEW YORK GIANTS

DRAFT TALK: QB **Kerry Collins** is surprised there has been talk of trading up from fourth overall in the draft to take **Eli Manning** or **Ben Roethlisberger**, but he says if it happens he will accept the challenge. Collins has one year at \$7 million left on his contract, so ideally the team would agree on an extension that would lower his cap number well before the draft. But Collins wants a longer extension than the two years he got in 2002. The team should extend Collins and use the No. 4 pick either to add a playmaker on defense or to take Iowa T **Robert Gallery** and upgrade Collins' protection.

ACHES AND PAINS: WR **Tim Carter** experienced postconcussion symptoms even after being put on injured reserve last month, but he is optimistic the problem will not become chronic. The team needs Carter to be a key offensive contributor next season. If it is not convinced Carter can stay healthy, it might have to consider taking Pitt WR **Larry Fitzgerald**, if available, in the first round. ... Doctors are optimistic that CB **Will Allen** can come back from an injury to his left foot, but at his position foot problems are a concern because of the cutting and pushing off corners do. —Neil Best



PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

LIFE WITHOUT BRIAN: RB **Brian Westbrook**, the team's most explosive player, is out with a torn triceps. His absence means the team will go from its three-back rotation to a two-back look, with **Duce Staley** and **Correll Buckhalter** sharing time next to FB **Jon Ritchie**. The Eagles did beat the Packers without Westbrook earlier in the season. **Reno Mahe**, an untested undrafted rookie, will replace Westbrook on punt returns. Mahe has averaged 9.2 yards, with a long of 17 yards, on six punt returns. ... CB **Troy Vincent** (hip flexor) should be back to battle the Packers' balanced offense. If Vincent isn't ready, **Sheldon Brown** and **Lito Sheppard** will split time in Vincent's place.

HOLDING THE LINE: To advance in the playoffs, the Eagles must hold the Packers' offense in check on the ground and in the air. In the teams' earlier meeting, Green Bay RB **Ahman Green** had 192 yards rushing and two TDs. The Eagles must take some of that production away because Packers fumbles were all that kept Philadelphia from losing that game. The Eagles also must watch for screen passes—especially when they're blitzing—to Green and backup RB **Tony Fisher**. —Mark Eckel



ST. LOUIS RAMS

BACK FOR THE ATTACK: The return of MLB **Robert Thomas** (groin) and WR **Isaac Bruce** (ankle) will provide boosts on both sides of the ball. Thomas has flourished after making the move from outside linebacker. The defense needs his speed and ability to play sideline to sideline. Although **Torry Holt** now is the go-to receiver, the passing game isn't the same without Bruce, who remains an elite player. ... LG **Andy McCollum**, who has had trouble containing quick moves by tackles, will have a difficult time against Panthers DT **Kris Jenkins**. The Rams may need C **Dave Wohlabaugh** to provide frequent help.

NOW IS THE TIME: QB **Marc Bulger**'s season ultimately will be judged on how he fares in the playoffs. He bounced back from a four-game stretch in which he threw 10 interceptions but hasn't looked as sharp as he did early in the season. Bulger must hit underneath and checkdown routes and refrain from forcing the ball deep. ... The run defense sprang some leaks late in the season because of overpursuit and a failure to plug gaps. If the same things happen Saturday, RB **Stephen Davis** will make the Rams pay. They need to take Davis out of the game and force Carolina's passing game to beat them. —Jim Thomas



SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

QB OUTLOOK: The status of QB **Jeff Garcia** will depend on negotiations to reduce his 2004 contract. Both sides have leverage. Garcia can threaten to walk, but the team has the protection of having backup QB **Tim Rattay** signed and ready if Garcia goes. ... Signing LB **Julian Peterson** may be difficult in light of the lucrative deal signed by Washington LB **LaVar Arrington**; it reportedly included a \$20 million bonus. Peterson is a better player, but they have the same agent. If the team can't sign Peterson, it may be forced to use the franchise tag on him instead of WR **Terrell Owens**. He is leaving, but the franchise tag would enable the team to get something for him in a trade.

CRUNCH TIME: Because of a failure in the last two years to extend the contracts of its young players, particularly on defense, the team is facing a crunch. Starting CBs **Ahmed Plummer** and **Jason Webster** and starting DE **John Engelberger** can become unrestricted free agents. Starting RB **Kevan Barlow** is a restricted free agent. The team plans to make Barlow an offer that would force suitors to compensate the 49ers with first- and third-round picks, which should keep other teams from pursuing him. —Ira Miller



SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

SACK DANCE: The team had 40 sacks this season, from 14 players, an impressive improvement over the 28 sacks of 2002. But the coaching staff should not become complacent and think the current defensive linemen are good enough to take this team to the next level. There is still work to be done. ... An overlooked fact: **Matt Hasselbeck** was the first Seattle quarterback since **Rick Mirer** in 1993 to start all 16 games.

OFFSEASON GAME PLAN: Defensive coordinator **Ray Rhodes** has been approached about the Redskins' head coaching position. Even if he stays, he will need more and better bodies on the defensive line. The time has come to fix the unit for the long haul with younger players, as the team did last year with the secondary by using its two top draft choices on CB **Marcus Trufant** and FS **Ken Hamlin**. The offense is mostly set with a core group of young players. The team will need to retain LT **Walter Jones** and WR **Darrell Jackson** and decide what to do at center and right guard. The Seahawks must invest their free-agent money on defense and spend their top draft choices on a speed-rushing end and run-stuffing defensive tackle. —Clare Farnsworth



TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

NOTABLE DIFFERENCE: C **John Wade**'s execution was superb for the most part, but he did not do a great job of diagnosing defenses and calling changes at the line, contributing to the line's inconsistency. The previous season, the line's young players became reliant on C **Jeff Christy**'s quick diagnoses. Adjusting to Wade's style hampered some linemen, but those players could have adjusted more quickly if they had studied more tape. ... The team will make a contract offer to DT **Warren Sapp**, but it won't get into a bidding war for Sapp because it is confident **Anthony McFarland** can play at Sapp's level and that **Chartric Darby** can play at an elite level at nose tackle.

NOTABLE IMPROVEMENT: Look for **Dewayne White** to push **Greg Spires** for the starting left defensive end job in training camp. White made great strides down the stretch in practice and split time with Spires in the last couple of games. White came to camp out of shape and needing refinement, but he turned himself into an all-around player. ... The team will have the 15th draft pick and likely will use it on an offensive tackle. One player the team is looking at is Iowa's **Robert Gallery**. —Roy Cummings



WASHINGTON REDSKINS

KEEP BETTS: Running back will be a primary issue during the offseason. **Ladell Betts** might give the team everything it needs at the position. He's a capable inside runner, can get outside, is a decent receiver and has improved as a blocker. But he missed most of 2003 because of two injuries. The team should hold on to him. ... Using a first-round pick on a tight end is hard to justify, and the team is unlikely to use its top pick, the fifth overall, on **Kellen Winslow**. But if the club can move down in the first round and get an extra pick, it might go for Winslow. It needs help at tight end. **Robert Royal** has yet to prove he's a strong enough blocker or receiver to make a difference. **Zeron Flemister** is out of chances to play to his potential. His blocking is inadequate.

POSITIVE PERFORMANCE: **Lennie Friedman**'s play over the last half of the season makes center one of the Redskins' strengths. He's an effective blocker and a decent shotgun snapper and is sound on his assignments. He also can play either guard spot. Friedman isn't signed for next season, but he could knock **Larry Moore**, whom he replaced as a starter, off the roster. —Paul Woody



MATT HAYES' INSIDER

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NFL is different, not better

OK, I'm Bob Stoops, and I've got a decision to make. I make \$2.5 million a year coaching the Oklahoma Sooners, and life is very good. Norman is a nice college town; it's not Malibu, but it's not Starkville, either. I'm so popular in the state of Oklahoma, I could run for governor and get 80 percent of the votes without campaigning.

Now, here comes New York Giants owner Wellington Mara. A nice man with good intentions, he desperately needs a coach and is willing to pay just about anything to pry me from my personal paradise. I'm going to give it all up—job security, three months' down time, a machine that recruits itself—to stroke my ego and prove I can coach in the NFL.

Yep, I'm going to trade it all for 18-hour workdays, pampered, pompous athletes playing for the next payday, no vacation, no down time, and, by the way, no margin for error. And they'll throw me a couple extra million a year for my troubles.

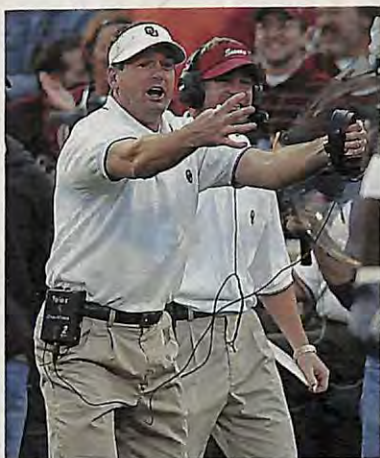
Are you nuts?
"It's not just a different game," Stoops says. "It's a different world."

And there you have it. Why would any college coach in his right mind want to coach in the NFL? Once you've hit the \$1 million-a-year salary mark, money ceases to be a motivation. At some point, quality of life has to enter the evaluation. Steve Spurrier's two-year NFL flirtation should seal it for any college coach with an itch to scratch: The grass isn't always greener on the pros' FieldTurf.

Spurrier said he wanted a new challenge, that things were stale and expectations unreasonable at Florida. Great—go coach Central Florida. A move to the NFL just isn't worth it. In college football, coaches are CEOs with complete control and, in some cases, are bigger than their universities. In the NFL, coaches are caretakers on a short leash, and players tug the line. NFL coaches are baby sitters and therapists; college coaches are patriarchs of a program.

Bill Callahan led the Raiders to the Super Bowl in his first season as head coach. A year later, the Raiders finished 4-12 and are looking for a new coach because players publicly claimed it just wasn't working. If a player complains in college, he's either at the end of the bench or on his way to another school.

Imagine a 27-year-old employee with his cap



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

For Stoops, the perks of the pros can't compare with his place at OU.

turned sideways strutting into the offices at Microsoft, demanding change because the stock is slipping, then stating in front of a television camera that employees no longer have faith in the corporate leadership. Say good night, Mr. Gates. The NFL is a corporation run unlike any other, where employees hold press conferences to announce they want a new boss.

It also is a business based on replaceable parts: teams, cities, history. College football is an enclave unto itself: cities within cities, chosen specifically by players because of a school's coach and tradition. No one player in college is bigger than the univer-

sity (see: Maurice Clarett).

Kids grow up singing "Hail to Victors," not "Hail to the Redskins." There is an undeniable, understood respect and reverence in the college game. There is a clear definition of who leads and who follows. Keyshawn Johnson became "Meshawn" Johnson when he signed his first NFL contract. Think Oklahoma wide receiver Mark Clayton yells at Stoops on the sideline, demanding Jason White throw him the damn ball?

This is what Spurrier decided to take a shot at for an extra couple million a year. This is why Spurrier is now holed up in his beach house on the Florida coast, having left \$15 million on the table and walked away from baby-sitting self-important, nouveau riche millionaires.

It's a different world, all right.

TSN

SPEED READ

■ Attention, university presidents and athletic directors: Let me direct you to Central Michigan, where trendsetting folks are making ground-breaking decisions. CMU hired Brian Kelly to coach its floundering program—the Brian Kelly who was 41-2 the last three seasons at Grand Valley State and won two straight Division II national titles. He's no coaching retread, no member of "the family." At some point, big schools will learn: It doesn't matter where you've coached; it's how you coach.

Ⓢ The 2003 season is complete, but fall 2004 will be here soon enough. Keep up with all the offseason news and notes at www.foxsports.com, keyword: college football.

INSIDE DISH

UCLA coach **Karl Dorrell** admits he "didn't anticipate it being this bad" in his first season in Westwood. Things hit rock bottom after last week's Silicon Valley Classic loss to Fresno State, with players bickering and melting down in the locker room. A lack of talent contributed to a 6-7 record, but a lack of discipline was the foundation for a season-ending five-game losing streak. Where does the blame fall for selfish play, poor practice habits and shaky game execution? Some can be attributed to former coach **Bob Toledo** and his hands-off style that still is ingrained in players. But Dorrell, despite suspending six players during the season for off-field transgressions, should shoulder a majority of the blame for letting the issues fester. ... For the second straight year, Virginia Tech's defense was exposed in the last month of the season, giving up an average of 35 points and 459 yards in the last five games. Coordinator **Bud Foster** says he will evaluate the scheme, coaching and players to stop the problem. The source could be Tech's linebackers, who underachieved most of the season. Foster is excited about the potential of freshman **Aaron Rouse**, who played well in an Insight Bowl loss to California. ... The ACC office privately believed that Florida's complaining about the officiating after its loss last month to Florida State were evidence of a team looking for an excuse. But now that ACC referee **Jack Childress** and back judge **Doug Foley** were involved in a key missed fumble call in the Auburn-Wisconsin Music City Bowl, commissioner **John Swofford** must evaluate those officials more carefully. Look for Big Ten commissioner **Jim Delany** to ask Swofford to review the game tape. —M.H.

SEAN DEVENEY'S INSIDER

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SPEED READS

■ Tracy McGrady's rough season got worse last week, when he hurt his hip during a loss to the Knicks. Magic officials were not happy McGrady went home while the game was in progress instead of returning to the bench. It wasn't the wisest move, but McGrady was legitimately hurt, and he has gone through a lot this season (some of which was his own fault). With the Magic generally bouncing back from its rough start, perhaps the team would have been better served covering for him, as most teams do for their stars.

■ Something radical is happening—fewer teams are sitting back and whining about the presence of zone defenses. Instead, they are working on zone offenses, using three-guard lineups to attack zones and allowing big men to shoot more. Slowly but surely, the quality of play is rising.

■ The Kings are doing the right thing by bringing Chris Webber along slowly. He is injury-prone, and no matter how well the Kings play in his absence, they are going nowhere in the postseason without him.

Billups must drive the Pistons

Darko Milicic is not the Pistons' problem. Sure, the team had the opportunity to draft Carmelo Anthony (or Chris Bosh or Dwyane Wade for that matter), but the Pistons fared just fine without Anthony last season.

Mediocre play from the front line is not a huge factor for Detroit, either. The Pistons too often get beaten on the boards, but they ranked 25th in the league in rebounding last season and still won 50 games.

The switch from Rick Carlisle to Larry Brown as coach is not much of a problem, though Carlisle had the team so tethered offensively that Brown is finding he must call a play on every possession, which has forced some adjustments. But it is hardly a reason for a slow start.

In fact, just how slow the Pistons' start has been is debatable. They were 21-13 through 34 games, putting them on pace to win 51 games, with their killer West Coast trip already behind them. They won 50 games each of the last two years.

Still, the Pistons have been inconsistent early in the season and should be on an even better pace than what they have established.

But forget all those other excuses because point guard Chauncey Billups thinks he knows exactly why Detroit is slightly lagging: himself.

"We've had some up and down times, no doubt," Billups says. "Everything is so new right now, and we are working through it. But I take a lot of that responsibility. I haven't been really consistent, and they need me to be."

Now more than ever, in fact. This season might be considered Billups' "prove it" year. He has had a remarkably odd career to this point, playing with six teams in seven seasons and never fulfilling the potential that had made him the No. 3 overall draft pick in 1997. Billups finally got himself some stability and a starting job when the Pistons signed him to a six-year deal in July 2002, and last season was



Billups needs to overcome his inconsistency for the Pistons to be a serious threat in the East.

the best of his career. What's more, in the postseason, Billups took the mantle of the go-to player on a team that supposedly was lacking a go-to player. An ankle injury cut short his postseason—and the Pistons' hopes for a berth in The Finals—but Billups entered this season not just as a worthy starter, but as a possible All-Star.

At times, Billups has been every bit as good as he was in the playoffs. He's tough, wide-bodied and drives the lane aggressively. He's a very good defender and does

a good job rebounding.

"He's a tough guy to stop," says Rockets coach Jeff Van Gundy. "And he seems to have gotten smarter. He is one of those guys who, as he has matured, has become a much better player. He obviously, at some point, made an adjustment and really changed how he approaches the game."

But Billups has endured some difficult stretches this season. In late November, he missed two key free throws that would have sealed a home win over the Hornets. Instead, Baron Davis wound up winning the game on a last-second dunk, and Billups—along with the Pistons—slipped into a monthlong funk. The Pistons went 7-8; Billups shot just 36.8 percent from the field. Only last week, when the Pistons again played at home against the Hornets (with Billups fighting the flu), did he seem to climb from his rut. He outplayed Davis, scored 31 points on 10-for-16 shooting and led the Pistons to a 108-99 win.

Whether that game can put Billups back on track is important for Detroit. The team has been patient with its occasional struggles so far, but if the Pistons are to fulfill their potential, they need Billups to be at the top of his game. Few players have the statistical impact on their team's fortune that Billups does. He is averaging 21.2 points and 42.5 percent shooting in Pistons wins; he is scoring 15.2 points and 33.9 percent in losses.

Billups admits that he and Brown are getting familiar with one another. Brown—himself a former point guard, and quite a good passer—is notoriously tough on point guards, and he expects them to think the way he did. But Billups is a scorer, not a pure point. He does not excel on the fast break, which Brown has been trying to emphasize.

"I knew he was going to be demanding coming into this," Billups says. "I had heard all kinds of things like that. And it's true, he puts a lot on you as a point guard."

He is trying to make me more of a cerebral player, which no coach has really done with me. He wants me to think through game situations. It's what he would do.

"But, also, it requires that he learn about me, about my game, too. I never had a coach like him, but he has never had a scoring point guard like me, either. It's a work in progress. I like the challenge because I want that responsibility. I want the game to be on me, win or lose."

It's already happening. Ben Wallace is the Pistons' best-known player, and Richard Hamilton is an excellent complementary player. But more and more, the no-name Pistons are becoming Billups' team. He just has to prove he is worthy. **TSN**

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M@IL BONDING

SEAN DEVENNEY ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS

Do you think the Cavs will trade Zydrunas Ilgauskas? If so, what do you think they could get for him?

Bob Lester, Cleveland

Bob: Ilgauskas could be moved out of Cleveland before the February 19 trading deadline. It has become obvious that coach Paul Silas is unhappy with his lackluster defense. Ilgauskas is a pretty good scorer, but he lacks quickness, toughness and the willingness to learn the fundamentals of playing defense.

Problem is, the Cavs know that there are not many true centers in the league. Ilgauskas' All-Star appearance last season probably was undeserved, but if Cleveland is going to trade him, the team wants something significant in return—some combination of a good shooter who can defend the perimeter, a point guard and/or a big man. It will be tough to find a team willing to give the Cavs good, young players in return for an injury-prone center who does not defend. Ilgauskas' contract is ugly, but it ends after the 2004-05 season. If the Cavs don't get a good package for him, they can allow his money to come off the books when he becomes a free agent.

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INSIDE DISH

By SEAN DEVENNEY



Carlisle (left) and Artest don't always see things the same way, but Indiana can overlook the personality conflict as long as it is winning.

Few things were more predictable at the start of the season than tension between Pacers SF **Ron Artest** and coach **Rick Carlisle**. Both are strong personalities, and Carlisle's tendency to micromanage obviously has rankled Artest, who has an innate resistance to coaching. Carlisle held Artest out of the starting lineup after he missed a shootaround, two days after the pair argued during halftime of a loss to New Jersey in which Artest put up some dubious 3-point shots that clearly were not part of Carlisle's plan for the offense. The hatchet has been buried, though, according to Artest and Carlisle. Several inquiries about Artest's availability in a deal were made to the Pacers last week; all were rebuffed. "Rick Carlisle is not stupid," says one Eastern Conference general manager. "Ron Artest helps you win games. They're not going to give him away." Base-year compensation rules that apply to players who sign contracts for big raises—Artest's six-year, \$42 million deal starts this season—would make any trade difficult, anyway. ... Pistons PG **Chauncey Billups** has this to say about Carlisle, his coach in Detroit last year: "Rick gave me a chance, and I will always owe him for that. I was a little surprised when (the

Pistons) let him go, but I guess, if you look back, there are always reasons. I never had a problem with

him, he was a great coach for me. But I'd say there were some guys in the locker room who did." ...

A run of solid, uptempo offense and efficient defense has shown why Minnesota's **Flip Saunders** is one of the best, most adaptable coaches in the league. Injuries have left the team with virtually no bench—SG **Fred Hoiberg** is the only significant reserve—and starting roles have been given to SG **Trenton Hassell** and PF **Gary Trent**, who has shifted to center. Yet the Timberwolves have rallied to challenge San Antonio at the top of the Midwest Division. All this makes SF **Wally Szczerbiak** (no favorite of star PF **Kevin Garnett**) look expendable, but he is another base-year compensation player whose

extension starts this season, making him difficult to move. ... The Celtics have not been happy with the way PF **Vin Baker** has been moving lately—too slow defensively, not aggressive offensively. Baker's playing time has been slowly eroding and, last week, he was replaced in the starting lineup by PF **Walter McCarty**. Baker feels fine, saying, "It's a coaching decision." The good news for the Celtics' front line is that **Mark Blount**, a solid defensive center, continues to develop a 15-foot shot that makes him dangerous in pick-and-rolls. Coaches would like to see Blount hoist a few more shots. ... The Spurs believe PG **Jason Hart** can become a solid reserve, but in the meantime, that spot is a liability—it was a strength last year with PG **Speedy Claxton** on board. The team let PG **Anthony Carter** go, and using SG **Manu Ginobili** to handle some minutes behind starting PG **Tony Parker** is not an option. A trade for PG **Charlie Ward** has been rumored, but the Knicks have not figured out their point guard situation, and if the team is making a playoff run, trading a tested veteran such as Ward would not make sense. Two point guards who could be had easily are Memphis' **Earl Watson** and Washington's **Brevin Knight**.



STRAIGHT SHOOTING BY CHARLEY ROSEN

On Kidd's ego, LeBron's education

As the halfway point nears, it's time to look at the bests and worsts of a season full of them

With so many bright new faces and intriguing trades, this has been the best of seasons. At the same time, with so many major injuries, with the sad outcome of Alonzo Mourning's comeback attempt, and with Rasheed Wallace's idiotic screed, this also has been the worst of seasons.

ATLANTIC Division

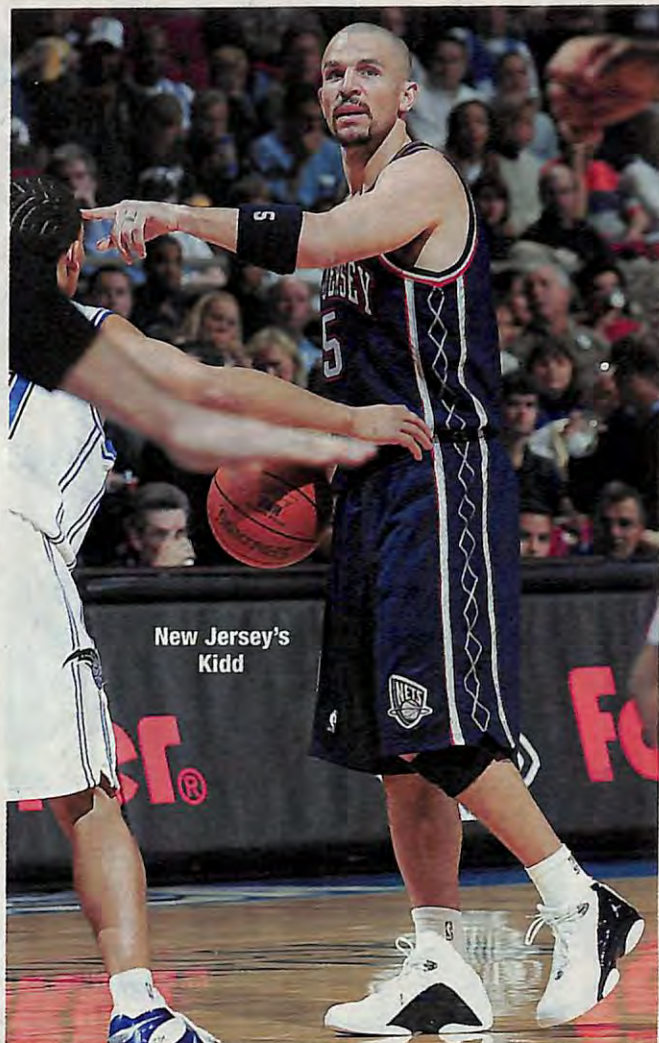
Celtics' best: Coach Jim O'Brien is a good soldier, industrious, flexible and quietly efficient. If Ricky Davis buys into the program, he easily could become a monster scorer and game-changer off the bench. **Worst:** Paul Pierce takes too many shots and makes too few. Vin Baker's comeback is admirable, but he's still limited, selfish and uninterested in playing defense.

Heat's best: Lamar Odom and Eddie Jones have lively bodies. Despite the Heat's many shortcomings, it still manages to compete at home (if not on the road). **Worst:** Miami's offense is clunky and arrhythmic and produces precious few clean shots. Moreover, the Heat can't shoot, pass or seal off the middle.

Nets' best: On the court, Jason Kidd's hustling, unselfish play has re-energized his teammates after a sluggish start. Though we all can sympathize with Zo's health problems, the Nets are much better off without his habitual late-game collapses and me-first attitude. **Worst:** Off the court, Kidd's monstrous ego and unbearable arrogance make him uncoachable. Why have so many front offices kowtowed to so many of his demands?

Knicks' best: They still play in the world's most fascinating city. **Worst:** Management has seriously overestimated the team. Lead-footed Dikembe Mutombo claims that he lost his birth certificate in Africa, and although he's listed as 37, he may be closer to 45. Keith Van Horn is soft and defenseless—and is the league's leading shot-blocker. Even when Antonio McDyess was healthy, he was short-armed whenever a game was up for grabs. And beware, Isaiah Thomas speaketh with forked tongue.

Magic's best: A coaching change always (albeit temporarily) inspires a team. But the flavor just might last longer than expected because, unlike with the departed Doc Rivers, honesty is Johnny



New Jersey's Kidd

Davis' only policy. **Worst:** T-Mac is a one-man band who doesn't always play hard.

76ers' best: Allen Iverson is fun to watch. So is the Sixers' quick-handed defense. Coach Randy Ayers is a nice guy. **Worst:** Iverson, Derrick Coleman and Glenn Robinson are uncoachable airheads.

Wizards' best: Jarvis Hayes plays about 34 minutes per game and theoretically will mature in a hurry. Eddie Jordan is one of the game's best tacticians, and his motion offense works. **Worst:** The Wizzes are the prototypical team that can't shoot straight. Because of their overall dearth of talent, Washington competes only with the rest of the league's bottom feeders.

CENTRAL Division

Hawks' best: Shareef Abdur-Rahim and Jason Terry score lots of meaningless points. Theo Ratliff

is an expensive and grumpy but effective shot-blocker. **Worst:** The Hawks are headed nowhere in a hurry, and the players already have given up.

Bulls' best: Jamal Crawford is a thrill-a-minute shot machine. Chicago has a brighter future than Atlanta. **Worst:** Crawford has no conscience. The Bulls commit too many unforced turnovers.

Cavaliers' best: LeBron James just turned 19 and has a huge upside. Credit Jim Paxson for clearing the decks of unsavory players so LeBron can learn his trade in a more wholesome environment. **Worst:** LeBron has much to learn: His too-low, too-slow shot release breeds inconsistency whenever he stops and pops in close quarters. He hasn't yet adjusted to the quickness of even halfcourt situations, ergo, his many turnovers. His idea of defense is to try to block shots or poach the passing lanes.

Pistons' best: Credit them for playing hard, scratchy defense. When Chauncey Billups shoots well, the Pistons are tough to beat. **Worst:** They're slicker than last season, but not nearly as beligerent—and maybe that's why they can't finish off games.

Pacers' best: When the spirit moves them, the Pacers play tougher defense for Rick Carlisle

than they did for Isiah Thomas. They're allowing 8.6 fewer points a game this season. **Worst:** Indiana has a shortage of reliable go-to scorers. Too many Pacers still are too young and foolish to be taken seriously. For Ron Artest, a disciplined offense is "boring."

Bucks' best: Michael Redd is a dependable scorer, good enough to be the fulcrum of a playoff team. The Bucks gladly share the ball, hustle on defense and are surprisingly adequate rebounders. **Worst:** Like most young teams, the Bucks have trouble winning on the road. Rookie T.J. Ford would have trouble shooting himself in the foot without missing.

Hornets' best: Baron Davis and David Wesley can score. **Worst:** Neither Davis nor Wesley can shoot. In fact, most of the Hornets couldn't hit an elephant in the butt with a paddle.

Raptors' best: Chris Bosh is a lanky, slithery

BOB LEVERONE / TSN

and K.G.'s excellence

rookie standout who's being allowed to mature in relative obscurity. Are we finally witnessing the domestication of Vince Carter? **Worst:** Aside from Carter, the Raptors have trouble scoring. Michael Curry is the team's solitary major league defender. And nobody can rebound.

MIDWEST Division

Mavericks' best: Steve Nash has the smarts, skills and heart to keep the Mavericks among the league's best. Everybody can score from everywhere. The Mavs are the Rucker League champs of the NBA. **Worst:** In the playoffs, defense counts more than offense.

Nuggets' best: Denver has young legs, hard workers and the league's most underrated coach in Jeff Bzdelik. Right now, Carmelo Anthony is more evolved than LeBron. **Worst:** Over the course of a long season, even young legs and hard workers get tired, and the Nuggets' lack of power at the center spot will accelerate the process. Because Anthony primarily is a spin-and-duck player, he needs to get more strength in the middle of his body. If he doesn't, come March his post-ups will be pushed out to the 3-point line.

Rockets' best: Jeff Van Gundy is trying to do the right thing—reverse the Rockets' habitual game plan and emphasize defense over offense. **Worst:** Yao Ming is slow side-to-side, slow to lift his arms and even slower getting off the floor. Any opposing center who can face up and go can turn Yao into a spectator on defense. Van Gundy's biggest challenge is how to rely on defense when the man in the middle can't guard his own lunch. But if Yao sits late in games, then who becomes the focus of Houston's already rickety offense? The sticky-fingered Steve Francis?

Grizzlies' best: They feature one of the deepest rosters in the league, allowing Hubie Brown to employ a 10-man rotation. They seldom take bad shots or throw fool-hardy passes. In the Southern-fried confines of The Pyramid, the Grizzlies play like champs. **Worst:** The team's only power player is the talent-challenged Jake Tsakalidis.

Timberwolves' best: Kevin Garnett is a supreme talent and an outstanding teammate.

Sam Cassell is ornery and stubborn but knows how to win. The Flipster still is a bright, young coach. **Worst:** Minnesota yields too many offensive rebounds in crunch time. The rude and crude antics of Latrell Sprewell will doom the T-wolves' chances to penetrate deep in the playoffs.

Spurs' best: Tim Duncan is the best at what he does. Gregg Popovich is honest, knowledgeable and patient. The Spurs still play lights-out defense. **Worst:** With the Admiral dry-docked, Manu Ginobili starting and Speedy Claxton running amuck elsewhere, their bench is short.

Jazz' best: Hooray for Jerry Sloan, one of the game's most authentic people. Forget about all those years of screen-and-rolls and cross-picks *ad infinitum*, Utah's young hooplings have resurrected Sloan and expanded his game plan. **Worst:** Osterdog, aka Greg Ostertag, remains a weak link. A misser of layups and free throws, he's still best known for passively permitting Shaq to slap his face.

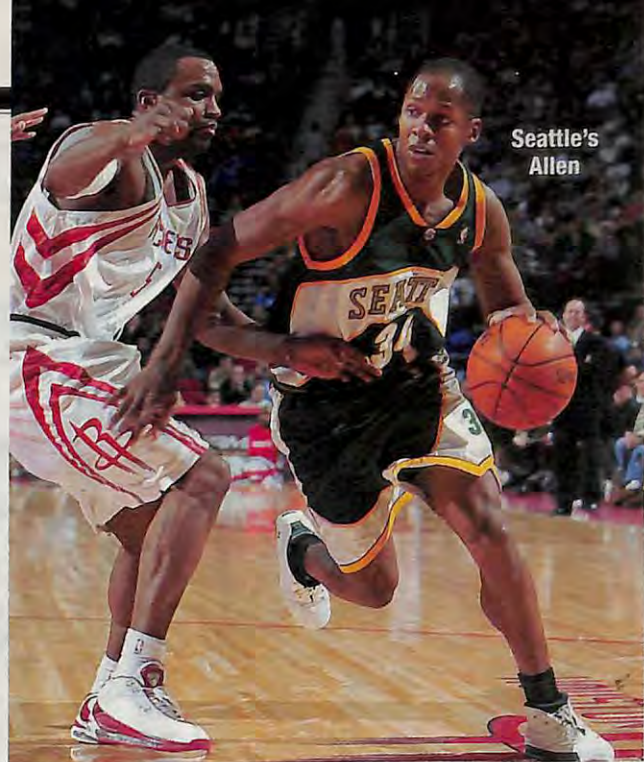
PACIFIC Division

Warriors' best: Lots of surprises. Erick Dampier finally has developed into a brute on the boards and a solid double-double guy. Mike Dunleavy also has become an effective player. Clifford Robinson's wheels still are intact. Jason Richardson is getting to the foul line and scoring

more. And Nick Van Exel is a unilateral 10-point spurt waiting to happen. The Warriors win with power and with a variety of offensive weapons.

Worst: Because they're among the league's most inefficient 3-point shooting team, the Warriors have trouble scoring when opponents pack the paint.

Clippers' best: Corey Maggette is the real deal—with a great work ethic, great hops and jets to spare. Elton Brand routinely outworks bigger and more talented opponents. **Worst:** Because their outside shooting is so poor, the Clippers want to take everything straight to the hoop. Quentin



Seattle's Allen

ROBERT SEALE / TSN

Richardson shoots first and never asks questions. The Clippers never will amount to more than playoff wannabes until they plug the gaping holes in their interior defense.

Lakers' best: They win a lot more than they lose, and they'll be there at the end. **Worst:** Because Kobe Bryant is selfish, immature and irresponsible (on-court and off); because Karl Malone can't fathom the offense, and because if nobody else is running the offense then Shaq won't either, the triangle has flat-lined. Then there's the time when the other team has the ball: The Lakers' screen-and-roll defense is a joke; Gary Payton has the will to play defense but not the lateral movement; their rotations consistently are late, and they can't keep opposing ballhandlers out of the paint.

Suns' best: Stephon Marbury still is the motor that makes the Suns rise and shine. Shawn Marion has the worst-looking jumper in captivity, but he bags enough of them to keep defenses semi-honest. **Worst:** Phoenix gets mauled on the boards game after game, a trend that hopefully will end when Amare Stoudemire returns from an ankle injury. But not even Stoudemire will help the Suns' pitiful defense.

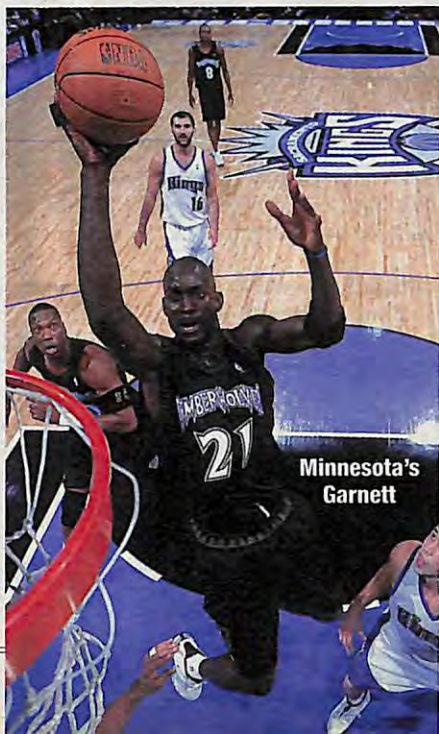
Trail Blazers' best: The Blazers have enough talent to win a championship. **Worst:** They're a barrel full of bad apples. Also, belying their collective experience, the Blazers play young on the road.

Kings' best: Sacramento is the most stylish team in the league. **Worst:** There isn't enough substance to grind out postseason victories.

Sonics' best: Ray Allen and Rashard Lewis are big-time scorers, and Ronald Murray is a wonderful option off the bench. Seattle's bombs-away offense produces the second-highest 3-point accuracy in the NBA. **Worst:** The Sonics' fatal flaw is their lack of power on the boards.

TSN

E-mail Charley Rosen, a former CBA player and coach, at crosen@sportingnews.com.



Minnesota's Garnett

ROCKY WIDNER / NBAE / GETTY IMAGES



MIKE DeCOURCY'S INSIDER

decourcy@sportingnews.com

SPEED READS

■ Despite being highly competitive, the Mid-American Conference has only put one team in each of the last four NCAA Tournaments. But Western Michigan, which has wins over Arizona State, Southern California and UAB, should be considered as an at-large candidate even if it fails to get the MAC's automatic bid.

■ The next time somebody screams about how two teams in a particular region just have to play each other, remember the U-Game. In the mid-1990s, UConn was urged to schedule UMass. Now, their annual game has become dreadfully dull, with the Huskies winning the last four by an average of 15 points.

■ Talking about how much better Duke would be if it hadn't released Kris Humphries from his letter of intent has become popular. But basketball is not that simple. Humphries would have given the Blue Devils more talent but altered their chemistry. Yes, Humphries is averaging 23.3 points and 10.8 rebounds. But Minnesota has managed to be bad with him.

Snooze button has been turned off

If you are a member of the NCAA Tournament selection committee—or a serious student of its work—you need to know this: Nap time is over.

You probably nodded off several times during the most serene preconference season in recent memory. There were few of the colossal early showdowns we enjoyed in previous years. With the major tournaments eviscerated by NCAA regulations regarding how frequently teams can participate, classic title games such as Arizona-Kentucky (Maui '93) and Cincinnati-Duke (Alaska '98) were but a memory. And Syracuse won the 2003 NCAA title after a December spent entirely on campus, so many promising teams felt justified hiding at home.

As a result, way too many teams appear to be on the way to the NCAA field. On New Year's Day, 69 major conference teams had at least seven victories, including every team in the ACC and SEC. Saint Joseph's was No. 1 in the Collegepi.com Ratings Percentage Index standings; the Hawks were 10-0. South Carolina was No. 100; the Gamecocks were 12-1. So you're going to need some help distinguishing the meat from the gristle. Conference play is your answer.

It seems no accident that the most compelling game of the season's first two months was a misplaced conference matchup: Wake Forest's pre-Christmas victory in three overtimes at North Carolina.

Conference games have become more important than ever. That's where NCAA Tournament credentials are established, at least in the big-time leagues. That's where teams usually compile the majority of their games against opponents with high RPI rankings and those that are on the road, which are two of the most important components weighed by the selection committee.



DILIP VISHWANATH / TSN

Pitt's Julius Page, Stanford's Justin Davis and Texas Tech's Andre Emmett had successful nonconference experiences.



JOHN CORDES FOR TSN



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

In their final pre-conference poll last season, the coaches on the ESPN/USA Today panel put Alabama, Notre Dame and Oregon in their top 10.

None was close by season's end. The coaches had Kentucky at No. 21 before a perfect SEC season carried it to No. 1. Syracuse wasn't ranked.

With conference competition beginning in earnest, teams competing for NCAA bids generally fall into one of five categories:

■ **The accomplished.** Examples: Georgia Tech, Saint Joseph's, Stanford, Wake Forest. This is the most exclusive club, but being included does not guarantee a coast to Selection Sunday.

These teams need to follow their impressive work to date by generating similar results against league opponents. That will be particularly difficult for Tech and Wake, which have to compete with Duke and North Carolina, among others, in the imposing ACC.

■ **The unchallenged.** Examples:

Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Connecticut. These teams appear to be of Final Four caliber. But it's hard to be certain because, at the end of last week, they had combined for two road wins and one over a top 25 RPI team.

UConn may own the poorest resume ever for a team ranked No. 1 this late in the season, but it has numerous opportunities in the coming weeks to validate the voters' confidence. In an upcoming eight-day stretch, the Huskies will play Oklahoma, North Carolina and Pittsburgh.

■ **The unproven.**

Examples: South Carolina, Florida State, Nebraska. They celebrated on New Year's Eve with a combined 33-3 record, not bad considering they won 37 games among them last season.

Storming through relatively gentle nonconference opposition created opportunities for these teams. It's possible any of them could approximate the success Boston College achieved in 2001: winning the Big East after perfecting its pressing style against a bunch of New England low majors.

But remember that Clemson stood 9-0 as 2003 dawned and won only six more games the rest of the season. A great nonconference record can be a source of confidence—or it merely can be decorative.

■ **The underestimated.** Examples: Alabama, Seton Hall, Texas Tech. Yes, the Tech coach periodically makes some news, but who has paid attention to the Red Raiders' impressive list of early victims (UTEP, Iowa, Utah)? Why hasn't anyone noticed the Crimson Tide's rapid progress against one of the SEC's few demanding nonconference schedules?

Fans of these teams would prefer their favorites be recognized with poll votes and positive buzzes, but for now, being underestimated by opponents may be in their best interest.

■ **The desperate.** Examples: Michigan State, California, Colorado. All were pro-

jected to be headed for the tournament this season, but none has yet played like it.

For a team with issues at point guard and power forward, the Spartans were overscheduled and could not beat any of six marquee opponents. Colorado's extreme home-court advantage wasn't sufficient to offset its dysfunctional guard play. Each will need to finish near the top of its conference to present a credible case for a tournament bid.

Members of the 10 major conferences will play roughly 900 league games from January through March. Some will turn out to be inconsequential, but it's hard to say now which those will be. Before the season, Florida State's March 6 visit to Georgia Tech figured to be a snoozer. Now, it appears possible that that game could decide the conference championship.

That might seem like a dream, but we're all wide awake now. **TSN**

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MAIL BONDING

MIKE DeCOURCY ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS

Why isn't Wisconsin's Devin Harris' name even whispered when people talk about the best point guards in the nation?

Mike Searls, Brodhead, Wis.

Mike: Harris is sometimes overlooked because the precise system Wisconsin runs makes him seem less essential than point guards who are relied upon to create opportunities. Still, I ranked Harris No. 11 among point guards entering the season. That should count at least as a whisper.

Harris was ranked behind two Big Ten point guards, Michigan's Daniel Horton and Illinois' Dee Brown. I'd put him ahead of both now, even though Harris has struggled some with his shot, especially from 3-point range. Like those two, Harris can score, but he's a better defender and a far better floor leader.

Ranking point guards based on their play this season, Jameer Nelson of Saint Joseph's, Raymond Felton of North Carolina and Jarrett Jack of Georgia Tech have been the best, and Marquette's Travis Diener and Seton Hall's Andre Barrett probably have played slightly better than Harris. That still would make him one of the half-dozen best at his position. Is that loud enough for you?

INSIDE DISH

By MIKE DeCOURCY

Kevin Mormin was planning to visit the Pittsburgh campus soon—and perhaps commit to join the Panthers in 2005—before he was killed in a van accident last week as the team from Our Savior New American School of Centereach, N.Y., traveled to a tournament in Charlotte. A 7-2 center from France, Mormin was considered a high-major prospect. He came to the United States to receive better coaching and face better competition. ... The emergence of Alabama SF **Kennedy Winston** is directly related to his improving health. Winston scored in double figures in nine consecutive games—and the Tide went 8-1 in that stretch—as he began to feel more comfortable following knee surgery to repair a torn ligament. Coaches still have to limit his minutes in practice, and he doesn't run sprints. But Winston's ability to create scoring opportunities with his quickness was essential in wins over Oregon, Charlotte and Wisconsin. ...

There's no excuse for the NCAA denying eligibility to Florida State C **Diego Romero**. Romero played in Argentina's club system as a teenager. After he enrolled at a U.S. junior college, the NCAA changed its policy toward players who compete with overseas professional clubs—future prospects were required to avoid playing with professionals. Those already in Division I schools—such as California center **Amit Tamir**—served only eight-game suspensions because they didn't have a chance to adjust to the new rule. Neither did Romero, but NCAA officials are treating his case differently because he did not attend a member school until this season. It's a petty stance, but the NCAA so far has been inflexible. ... One of the season's most puzzling developments is the decline of Texas C **James Thomas**. Known for his tough, high-energy style, he appears to have a case of senioritis and has been demoted to part-time status. He hasn't played more than 20 minutes since Texas' second game and

hasn't hit double-figure rebounds since the season opener. He averaged 11.0 rebounds last season but is not playing with the same fire. ... Athletic apparel company Reebok, which hired **Sonny Vaccaro** after he left the basketball operation at Adidas, will sponsor Vaccaro's various prep basketball events: the ABCD Camp, the Big Time Tournament in Las Vegas and the Roundball Classic, which began in Pittsburgh but recently has been staged at Chicago's United Center. ... Word in the coaching community is that **Mike Jarvis**, fired last month by St. John's, is curious to see whether there will be openings at Georgetown and Miami. Hoyas coach **Craig Esherick** and the Hurricanes' **Perry Clark** began the season with their jobs in jeopardy, but soft non-league schedules have helped calm things down. Jarvis built a solid program at Georgetown's crosstown rival, George Washington, before accepting the St. John's job.



The passion that once marked Thomas' play has vanished.

FRANK FRANKLIN / AP

TSN POWER POLL

The TSN Power Poll is determined by TSN writers and editors.

Rk.	Team (last week)	W-L	TSN Number
1.	Wake Forest (1)	9-0	4: 3s by Chris Paul vs. New Mexico; his season total had been seven.
2.	Stanford (4)	10-0	10: Points from Josh Childress in season debut vs. Washington State.
3.	Saint Joseph's (3)	11-0	11: Straight wins to open the season, the Hawks' best start ever.
4.	Duke (6)	10-1	600: Wins for coach Mike Krzyzewski after beating Clemson last week.
5.	Oklahoma (5)	10-0	400: Wins for coach Kelvin Sampson after beating Princeton last week.
6.	Connecticut (7)	11-1	53.5: Ben Gordon and Denham Brown's combined 3-point percentage.
7.	Arizona (9)	9-1	700: Wins for coach Lute Olson after beating Arizona State last week.
8.	Georgia Tech (2)	12-1	17: Fewer free throws made than Georgia in Tech's first loss.
9.	Kentucky (12)	9-1	9.1: Rebounds per game by 6-6 Chuck Hayes.
10.	Pittsburgh (10)	14-0	34: Consecutive games won at home, the longest streak in the nation.
11.	Cincinnati (11)	9-0	26.2: Bearcats' average margin of victory.
12.	Syracuse (15)	9-1	22: Career high points by Josh Pace against Michigan State.
13.	Louisville (17)	9-1	17.8: Turnovers per game by the Cardinals' opponents.
14.	Gonzaga (14)	9-2	13.0: Points per game by freshman Adam Morrison.
15.	Mississippi St. (19)	11-0	3: Starters shooting over 50 percent from the field.
16.	North Carolina (8)	8-2	56: Points against Kentucky; the Tar Heels' season average is 87.6
17.	Vanderbilt (20)	11-0	11.2: Vandy's average edge in rebounding.
18.	Kansas (21)	8-2	27.4: Percent of 3-point shots the Jayhawks have made.
19.	Florida (23)	9-2	192: Turnovers, 12 more than the Gators' opponents.
20.	Providence (—)	8-1	19.6: Points per game by 6-7 center Ryan Gomes.
21.	Marquette (22)	9-2	35.2: Opponents' field-goal shooting percentage.
22.	Texas (—)	7-2	29.1: Points per 40 minutes by P.J. Tucker.
23.	Wisconsin (13)	9-2	7: Games missed by Alando Tucker because of injury.
24.	Texas Tech (—)	11-2	7: Times Andre Emmett has topped 20 points this season.
25.	Illinois (—)	9-2	11: Margin of deficit before rallying to beat Illinois State.

Dropped out: Purdue (16), Maryland (18), Michigan (24), Dayton (25).

Records through last Saturday

STOCK EXCHANGE

➤ **Joe Fan.** After the scarcity of games over the holidays, the start of conference play signals the second leg of the season. Even if your team had a rough start, this is the chance to rebound.

➤➤ **Arizona.** The Wildcats narrowly avoided an upset to Louisiana-Lafayette—in their own holiday tournament—before shaping up against Arizona State.

➤ **Michigan State.** Six brutal nonconference games, six losses. And the Spartans went out with a whimper in the last of those contests, giving up 96 points to Syracuse.

By no means perfect

There were nine unbeaten major-conference teams entering the first week of the new year. In many cases, this was as much a feat of creative scheduling as basketball excellence. Three teams in particular are suspect: The collective 32-0 record of Georgetown, Mississippi State and Vanderbilt includes a combined total of eight major-conference victims, of which only two reached the NCAA Tournament last season.

Georgetown

Record: 10-0.**RPI strength of schedule:** 310.**Best win:** Penn State.**Road wins:** Penn State, The Citadel.

Closer look: Georgetown needed a soft early schedule. Coach Craig Esherick had been getting hammered by critics, and he was open-

ing a critical season without star forward Mike Sweetney. The Hoyas were away from home only twice before January; they'll be on the road for four of six games beginning Saturday.

Projection: The Hoyas will be an attractive choice to the NIT.

Mississippi State

Record: 11-0.**RPI strength of schedule:** 193.**Best win:** UAB.

Road wins: Western Kentucky, Santa Clara, Tulane, Arkansas-Little Rock.

Closer look: This easily is the best team on the list—perhaps even better than the Bulldogs team that last season merited a No. 5 seed from the NCAA selection committee. Mississippi State is not as strong at the point, but transfer Lawrence

Roberts is more athletic and energetic and may turn out to be more assertive than predecessor Mario Austin. But Roberts could use more touches.

Projection: The SEC West favorite, Mississippi State will be one of the league's NCAA representatives.

Vanderbilt

Record: 11-0.**RPI strength of schedule:** 162.**Best win:** Michigan.**Road wins:** Belmont, TCU.

Closer look: With 10 players averaging at least 10 minutes, Vanderbilt is as deep as any team in the SEC. It also is one of the few teams anywhere with abundant height. The

PLAYER of the WEEK

Andre Barrett, PG, Seton Hall



How big must you be to function as a big-time Division I player? Not very. Barrett is listed at 5-10 but produced consecutive double-doubles in victories over Rhode Island and La Salle. He averaged 24.0 points and 11.0 assists and shot 46.4 percent from the field, 50.0 percent on 3-point attempts and 86.7 percent at the foul line. He also had seven rebounds in the win over Rhode Island. That's a pretty big number for such a little guy.

MIKE DeCOURCY's 3 QUESTIONS

1 Is Stanford ready for the Arizona desert? Maybe a better question is whether Arizona is ready for the Stanford frontcourt. The Wildcats frustrated Arizona State's Ike Diogu last week, but the Cardinal front line is not an army of one. A lesser Stanford team beat a better Arizona team last season at McKale Center. Saturday's game may be the most important this year in deciding the Pac-10 title.

2 Will Missouri make the NCAA Tournament? Missouri's win over Iowa was its first solid performance—and only its second win over an RPI top 100 team. The Tigers began the week with a 5-4 record. Their remaining opponents have a composite winning percentage of .767, and they still face a full slate of Big 12 road games. It will be a long, hard climb.

3 What made Kentucky's win over North Carolina special? The Wildcats showed they can guard a great low-post scorer. Kentucky's 6-6 Chuck Hayes and 6-8 Erik Daniels easily muscled 6-9 Sean May off the block. Their double-teams and rotations were crisp. They got help from great ball pressure out front. What should be a weakness for Kentucky might turn out to be a strength.



salient issues will be whether the Commodores can be as effective on the road as at Memorial Gym and whether there is enough speed to cope with the league's great athletes.

Star Matt Freije has benefited from a limited load early, but it's hard to imagine Vandy winning frequently in the SEC if he doesn't top 30 minutes more than once every 11 games.

Projection: Wins

over Michigan and Indiana are impressive, but making the tournament means staying ahead of Georgia, Tennessee and South Carolina. The Commodores probably are better than those teams, but do they believe it? —Mike DeCourcy

Scouts' views

Observations from the sidelines:

One of the big keys to the success of Minnesota freshman **Kris Humphries** has been a change in his body. As a high school All-American, Humphries looked like a rigid—sometimes stiff, especially in the upper body—power forward. Credit him for seemingly focusing less on muscle mass and more on flexibility and athleticism. He's a much different player now than he was at the end of his senior year in high school, and he has turned into an even better weapon. ... Missouri freshman **Linas Kleiza** is one of the toughest players in college basketball. He earned a reputation as a hard worker, and that has followed him through the early part of the season. Kleiza simply never gives up on a play. However, he has a little nasty streak that he's got to temper so he won't get himself

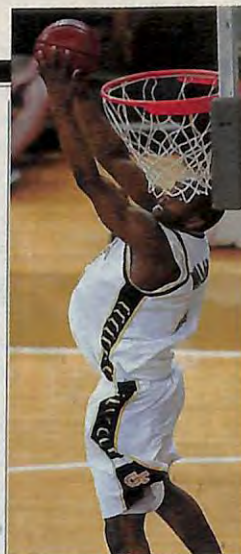


Humphries

PAUL BATTAGLIA / AP

into foul trouble like fellow Lithuanian **Darius Songaila** once did. Once Kleiza learns to channel that energy even more, he'll be all the better. By the end of the year, his attitude should help raise Missouri's intensity level. ... Illinois' **Deron Williams**, who has been recovering from a broken jaw, could be one of the most underrated guards in college basketball. The guy knows how to score. He does it by using angles and touch. His body, which isn't overly athletic but is very strong, allows him to get into the seams and make plays. Leave him open and he makes you pay. He's got a good enough first step to get things accomplished. He's just a player. ... **Hassan Adams** is a tough

matchup. He's 6-4 and takes you off the dribble. He's quick and he rebounds. He can guard anybody on the court. Making 3s, that's not what he does best. Arizona isn't a great shooting team, and Adams isn't a great shooter. Zone is probably the way to go against them.



JOHN AMIS / AP

TOP 5 dunkers

You could argue that a layup is as good as a dunk. But you would be wrong. In the high-emotion game of college basketball, nothing revs up—or shuts up—a crowd more than a good jam.

1. SF Isma'il Muhammad, 6-6, Georgia Tech. College basketball's ultimate bench player has sparked several wins during Tech's surprising start with thunderous dunks over defenders.

2. SF James White, 6-7, Cincinnati. White hasn't played enough after transferring from Florida for Bearcats fans to know all that he can do, but this much is certain: He finishes with glitz to spare.

3. F Hassan Adams, 6-4, Arizona. His extraordinary leaping ability allows him to soar over bigger defenders and dunk quite angrily.

4. SG J.R. Giddens, 6-5, Kansas. One of the highlights for the still-coming-together Jayhawks has been Giddens, who outpoints Michigan State's Shannon Brown for the title of best freshman dunker.

5. PG Nate Robinson, 5-8, Washington. When he rises high enough to throw one down, it is one of the great spectacles in college basketball. —Kyle Veltrop

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MAXIMUM COLLEGE BASKETBALL



KARA YORIO'S INSIDER

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Seeing the stars before they shine

From the day after Christmas through the first weekend of the year, most American sports fans watched college bowl games. But during that same time, a pretty exciting hockey tournament was almost completely ignored in the United States. The IIHF World Junior Hockey Championships, a 10-country tournament, features play by the world's best players under 20. It is one of the highlights of a player's career, no matter what he goes on to do.

"It's a big, huge deal. That's the pinnacle of hockey right there," says Devils center Scott Gomez, who played in the 1998 and 1999 tournaments for the United States and has won two Stanley Cups with the Devils.

This year's tournament was in Finland, and the United States sent its best team in years. The event wasn't televised in the United States and its results weren't easily found in American sports sections, but next year, hockey-starved fans can take a holiday trip to North Dakota and Minnesota to see the tournament in person. ESPN does not plan to broadcast any of those games, but with the United States playing host—and if the Americans play well—the medal round might be televised.

But don't wait for the broadcasters to wake up. Pack up the kids. High-level hockey can be had December 25, 2004, through January 4, 2005, whether the NHL is shut down in a labor dispute or not. It'll be fun and exciting and full of players fans will learn to love. The people involved know its potential and hope the timing works in their favor.

"We're keeping our fingers crossed for a lockout," says Carl Levi, corporate relations manager for Ralph Engelstad Arena in Grand Forks, N.D. That building and "Little" Ralph Engelstad Arena in Thief River Falls, Minn., will be the sites of the tournament.

Fans can see the NHL's future stars at the World Junior championships. Some have been drafted—such as American center Zach Parise, a Devils draft pick in June who plays for the University of North Dakota and led this year's tournament in scoring heading into the medal round.



ADRAIN WYLD/AP

Fans can see up-and-comers such as the Devils' Zach Parise at the World Junior championships.

Others, such as Russian right winger Alexander Ovechkin, will be drafted next June. Ovechkin is the consensus No. 1, and as scouts and general managers watch him, they're also eyeing others to see who can step up in a pressure-filled tournament when surrounded by skilled players the same age.

"This thing is such a huge tournament for hockey," Levi says. "Look at all the pro scouts who are there and what it means to hockey. With pros playing in the Olympics, this is the last spot for pure amateurism. It's our king for those of us who love amateur sports."

Well, sort of. Most of the players are from junior and college teams, but a few, such as Penguins goalie Marc-Andre Fleury, are NHL players with junior eligibility. So it's not an entirely amateur tournament, but it still carries the passion and wished-for purity of amateur sports.

Levi says the Grand Forks community has shown great support, and ticket sales are brisk, thanks in part to Parise's fan following (and hopes he'll play in the tournament next year) and the proximity to Canada. The website (www.ralphsworld-jr.com) has a countdown clock, information and a place for fans to buy and sell tickets.

For those 11 days of the 2005 World Junior Hockey Championships, Grand Forks will be consumed by the tournament. It'll be a multicultural hockey experience, a mini-Olympics. For those able to turn off the Tostitos Bowl and get there, it'll be worth the journey. **TSN**

S Follow your favorite teams and players with GameTrax, up-to-the-minute scores, statistics, analysis, Kara Yorio's weekly Power Poll and more. Go to www.foxsports.com, keyword: NHL.

SPEED READ

■ **Blue Jackets** G.M. Doug MacLean admitted he was fallible and stepped down as coach with the hope someone else would get more from his roster. That lack of ego is pretty rare in management positions such as his. Perhaps others will learn and look at things more objectively. Did you notice, Glen Sather?

INSIDE DISH

Expect more production from Islander **Oleg Kvasha** now that he's at center. With the injuries to C **Alexei Yashin** and RW **Mark Parrish**, the Islanders need every point Kvasha can provide. At center, he has more defensive responsibilities and will be forced to keep moving. Centers have fewer stops and starts than a winger, where Kvasha was caught flat-footed at times. Faceoffs will be a challenge for him. ... The Canucks made a smart move extending coach **Marc Crawford**'s contract. Crawford signed with the understanding that G.M. **Brian Burke** would sign an extension soon. But rumors persist that Burke, a New England native, could end up in Boston. ... The NHL will announce its 2004 All-Stars on Thursday night. As always, there will be controversy surrounding who belongs on the teams. There is no question the following players, who are not the league's biggest names and were not voted onto the team by fans, deserve a spot in the game in St. Paul, Minn.: Coyotes LW **Ladislav Nagy**, Thrashers C **Marc Savard**, Canadiens D **Sheldon Souray**, Kings RW **Ziggy Palffy** and Blue Jackets LW **Rick Nash**. ... The return of D **Barret Jackman** should bolster the Blues' defense, but the team really needs a boost offensively. To keep pace with the rest of the Western Conference powers, St. Louis must have consistently threatening second and third lines. ... The Devils are finally starting to feel the effects of injuries up front, particularly one to RW **Jamie Langenbrunner**, who had knee surgery November 29. Heading into the weekend, he had yet to skate and is not expected to return until late January at the earliest. The Devils must find a way to fight fatigue and score a little more. —K.Y.

Eastern Conference



ATLANTA THRASHERS What has gone right also has gone wrong and has an excellent chance of becoming the team's Achilles' heel. The play of G **Pasi Nurminen** has been good, and the Thrashers have ridden him. But Nurminen has shown signs of tiring and that will get worse. He has never played more than 52 games in any league but was on pace for 64. It might not sound like much of a difference, but 12 games is a lot, particularly down the stretch under playoff-run pressure. For things to continue to go right in the net, the Thrashers have to rely more on G **Byron Dafeo** so Nurminen isn't burned out by the playoffs.



BOSTON BRUINS The play of young G **Andrew Raycroft** and veteran G **Felix Potvin** was part of what went right in the early going. C **Joe Thornton** also played well, and LW **Sergei Samsonov** was healthy. But Samsonov hurt his knee, and Thornton got distracted by the clutching, grabbing, high sticks and slashing. Raycroft hasn't been as good recently, and Potvin is unhappy being the backup. Owner **Jeremy Jacobs** put the team, particularly G.M. **Mike O'Connell**, on notice. So as 2003 turned into 2004, very little was going right for the Bruins. The team needs a bigger effort top to bottom and a healthy Samsonov to return to form. A little more heart and little more latitude for creativity wouldn't hurt, either.



BUFFALO SABRES Stability has been a strong point for the Sabres. There are no more questions about the team folding; there are rumors about trades, but not with the urgency of a team in financial ruin. RW **Miroslav Satan** will be moved—because he is in a scoring slump, not because the team needs to save money. On a much-improved team, RW **J.P. Dumont** turned his potential into production for the Sabres before a hip injury sidelined him. Dumont's offense was something going right, but owner **Tom Golisano's** support has been the biggest positive.



CAROLINA HURRICANES Things were growing stagnant for the Hurricanes, who were keeping the goals-against down but weren't scoring very much themselves. Rookie C **Eric Staal** is adapting quite well to the NHL. But coach **Paul Maurice's** message was old and his style stale, so he was replaced by former Islanders coach **Peter Laviolette**. Once they adapt to their new coach's ways, the Hurricanes will be aggressive and feisty. But it's likely to take months for the transformation to pay off consistently with victories.



FLORIDA PANTHERS G.M.-coach **Rick Dudley** blamed the media for the Panthers' problems, saying the local papers only see the negatives. But the pessimistic prose is not the problem. G **Roberto Luongo** has been good, even great, at times. He is what has been going right for this team, giving the franchise hope it can build around him, LW **Nathan Horton** and D **Jay Bouwmeester**. So what's wrong? The team is in flux, unsure if it's looking for a new coach or sticking with Dudley for the rest of the way. Should the players learn Dudley's system or wait until a new coach comes in? The players need to know what's next.



MONTREAL CANADIENS Let's start with what's gone right: the play of G **Jose Theodore** and D **Sheldon Souray**. Theodore looks much like the Hart Trophy-winning goaltender of two seasons ago. Souray has not only been an offensive force, he is providing a physical presence and has remained healthy. What has gone wrong can be found in the offensive end. No matter how great a season Souray is having—and he is at or near the top of the team's scoring leaders—the Canadiens are in trouble. They are small at center, so getting a bigger body up the middle would help them improve their offense.



NEW JERSEY DEVILS The Devils have the best penalty killing in the league, and it's not just because G **Martin Brodeur** is the last man back. The penalty killers have been together a long time, and they know each other well. In addition, the opposing power play can't be too aggressive pinching in because of the short-handed scoring threats of C **John Madden**, LW **Patrik Elias**, LW **Sergei Brylin** and puck-moving D **Scott Niedermayer** and **Brian Rafalski**. The offense is still coming by committee and hasn't failed despite the loss of RW **Jamie Langenbrunner**. Nothing significant has gone wrong on the ice, but fans still aren't coming out to watch the defending champions, and the team is losing money, which is wrong on a lot of levels.



NEW YORK ISLANDERS G **Rick DiPietro** was supposed to have his breakout season, but he requested and received a return to the AHL to sharpen his play. This was one of the many things that have gone

wrong for the Islanders. But what had been so wrong is suddenly right. The Isles have lost C **Alexei Yashin** for three months while his severed wrist tendons heal, which is a big blow, but that loss took away the remainder of the team's biggest excuse for not performing up to expectations. If Yashin didn't win the game with his play, teammates cited his failure, ignoring the need for their own effort and execution. With the Isles unable to rely on their highest-paid player, suddenly everyone is contributing.



NEW YORK RANGERS Behind the scenes, assistant coach **Tom Renney** was given the reins to teach a system, and players have shown interest in learning what he's trying to teach. That is where the Rangers' biggest wrong again rears its ugly head. Taking an interest and executing are two different things. The latter requires diligence and effort, getting rid of the laziness and stupid mistakes that have plagued the Rangers in recent seasons. At times, the team has shown it knows how to put Renney's strategy into action. But coach **Glen Sather**, still the motivator of this bunch, must get the Rangers to play hard and pay attention to detail every night.



OTTAWA SENATORS Little was going right for the Senators in October and November. The one-goal games they used to own were being given away through little mistakes brought about by lapses in concentration and the play of a well-prepared opposition. But all of those wrongs are turning slowly into positives as the Senators begin making a run at the Northeast Division-leading Maple Leafs. RW **Marian Hossa** and RW **Daniel Alfredsson** are scoring and G **Patrick Lalime's** play has improved. Still in the wrong column is the play of LW **Petr Schastlivy**, whom the Senators thought was good enough to replace LW **Magnus Arvedson**, who went to Vancouver as a free agent. But through 35 games, Schastlivy was scratched 10 times, including seven straight games, and was one of only two minus players on the team.



PHILADELPHIA FLYERS Coach **Ken Hitchcock's** defensive system is locked into place, which meant the Flyers were able to stay in close games even when they lost their scoring touch. But December's slump was brought on by mistakes made within Hitchcock's system. Then when G **Robert Esche** was injured, G **Jeff Hackett** couldn't shoulder the load. The Flyers don't think Hackett can be their No. 1 and are trying to develop Esche into that role. Esche needs to remain healthy and the Flyers need to spark the offense and get their confidence back as soon as possible for things to continue to go right. They also need to figure out how to win more games on the road.



PITTSBURGH PENGUINS G **Marc-Andre Fleury** represents everything that has gone right for the Penguins. The team was right to sign him and keep him in the NHL. The team was right to let him start and learn in the NHL without the pressure of high expectations for the team. He played better than could be expected and was rewarded with another right move—being sent to the World Junior Championships in Finland to play for Canada. But everything else has gone wrong for the Penguins, who can't overcome a lack of talent brought on by payroll purging and the serious injury to C **Mario Lemieux**. This team will be in the running for the top pick in June.



TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING The Lightning, although behind the Thrashers, hold many games in hand, which gives them more time to fix their biggest wrong—the tensions between C **Vincent Lecavalier** and coach **John Tortorella**. The answer to this problem is not in trading the talented Lecavalier. The answer is Lecavalier's teammates pushing him to play better, which would force Tortorella to play him more. Lecavalier must put the team above his personal problems with the coach. It happened last season; it can happen again.



TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS The Leafs were hampered by injuries to C **Joe Nieuwendyk**, RW **Owen Nolan**, C **Nik Antropov**, LW **Gary Roberts** and RW **Alexander Mogilny**. But C **Mats Sundin** stepped up and played well—and G **Ed Belfour's** play was improved—helping the Leafs through a red-hot November and December. This team needs to build as big a lead as possible in the conference because injuries are going to crop up again when the older bodies hit the wall during the marathon schedule. The many veterans on this team will need some rest.



WASHINGTON CAPITALS At one time, C **Robert Lang** led the league in points, D **Sergei Gonchar** led in assists and points by a defenseman, and RW **Jaromir Jagr** was averaging more than a point a game. But only in those statistics can you find anything right. The Caps are being crushed by an inexperienced and bad defense. G **Olaf Kolzig** has not played as well as he can. Everyone is on the block, so players are playing for themselves. The Capitals' problems won't be fixed by one move or a new coach. The cracks run deep and G.M. **George McPhee** will have a long summer trying to correct it—if he still has a job.

Western Conference



ANAHEIM MIGHTY DUCKS Identifying what has gone wrong is much easier than identifying what has gone right. Early injuries to D **Keith Carney** and C **Steve Rucchin** hurt a team that hasn't gotten good goaltending from playoff sensation **Jean-Sebastien Giguere**. C **Sergei Fedorov** has not taken over the team, and free-agent signee LW **Vaclav Prospal** has struggled. Consistency and a true personality have not been found by this team. Coach **Mike Babcock** hasn't discovered this season's equivalent to "greasy hockey." The Ducks haven't been able to win on the road and have pitiful scoring. On the bright side, G **Martin Gerber** has played well when Babcock sits the slumping Giguere.



CALGARY FLAMES How quickly right goes wrong. The November trade for G **Mikha Kiprusoff** was a huge plus for this turned-around team. With No. 1 G **Roman Turek** out because of a serious knee injury, Kiprusoff stepped in and was outstanding. He and backup G **Jamie McLennan** helped the Flames continue to gain points. But Kiprusoff has sprained a ligament in his knee and will be out at least a month. Even with the loss of Kiprusoff, and despite the improving play of RW **Jarome Iginla**, who is finding his scoring touch, the team needs more offense more than anything. Iginla and RW **Shean Donovan**, an offensive threat, must step it up even more.



CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS The serious injury to G **Jocelyn Thibault** reduced this team's chances of having a successful and playoff-bound season. Add serious injuries to LW **Eric Daze** and C **Alexei Zhamnov**, and the Blackhawks have had an uphill battle. Because of that, they looked for more from three young forwards, C **Tyler Arnason**, LW **Kyle Calder** and RW **Tuomo Ruutu**. Up front at even strength, the Blackhawks are getting the job done well enough to be competitive if they can reduce the goals against. The power play is pitiful, but the return of key injured players will help.



COLORADO AVALANCHE Rarely have all the components of the high-powered lineup been healthy at the same time. But LW **Alex Tanguay** and RW **Milan Hejduk** have handled the offense in the absence of the bigger names. The biggest question mark before the season is what has gone right: G **David Aebischer** has played well and earned the confidence and respect of his teammates. Something else that has gone right: G.M. **Pierre Larocque's** acquisition of LW **Steve Konowalchuk** from the Capitals has added surprising scoring.



COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS Getting RW **Nikolai Zherdev** to Columbus amid all the red tape and international intrigue was something that has gone right. Beyond Zherdev, the Blue Jackets have LW **Rick Nash**, and that's just about it on most nights. This team is a one-trick pony when it comes to scoring, and that won't carry any club out of the conference basement in this league. The Jackets do have enough talent, however, to shock unprepared opponents in this day of parity.



DALLAS STARS G **Marty Turco's** slow start hurt, but he wasn't the only thing going wrong in Dallas. Coach **Dave Tippett's** job was put in jeopardy because star players, such as C **Mike Modano** and D **Sergei Zubov**, among others, have played at mediocre levels. It wasn't all from a lack of effort; the injury to RW **Jere Lehtinen** hurt. He is one of the most underrated players in the league, and his was a significant absence. But Turco led a turnaround in December and seems to be hitting his stride. He is the primary reason the team has eked its way into the top eight and the best example of what has gone right.



DETROIT RED WINGS The luxury of keeping two top goaltenders has produced an unusual development. **Dominik Hasek's** iffy groin is going to force the Red Wings to hold on to **Curtis Joseph** as an incredibly expensive insurance policy, and it will unsettle the locker room when Hasek returns. Hasek isn't the only one who has been bothered by injuries—this team has overcome serious injuries to D **Derian Hatcher**, D **Chris Chelios** and C **Henrik Zetterberg**. Through it all, C **Pavel Datsyuk** has emerged as a star, capable of leading a team of veteran stars while putting his name up with the league's scoring leaders.



EDMONTON OILERS The penalty-killing unit has been the Oilers' biggest downfall. At times, it has been the worst in the league. A power-play goal gives the opposition confidence and takes a little life out of the shorthanded team. The Oilers need to play with more desperation and find a way to regain their confidence. They need an offensive player to score and spark his

teammates. Calling RWs **Brad Isbister**, **Ales Hemsky** or **Radek Dvorak**. What has gone right? Ridding themselves of the distraction that was the **Mike Comrie** trade rumor mill puts the focus on the ice.



LOS ANGELES KINGS The club has been wronged more than it has done wrong. Is there another team that has dealt with a string of serious injuries to players as significant as RW **Adam Deadmarsh** and C **Jason Allison**, who haven't played since last season? D **Lubomir Visnovsky**, LW **Ian Laperriere** and C **Esa Pirnes** have suffered concussions, and C **Jozef Stumpel** was out for a stretch. Now the Kings have lost G **Roman Cechmanek** to a serious hip injury. Still, coach **Andy Murray** has kept this team at or near the top of the Pacific Division thanks in large part to the play of RW **Ziggy Palffy**. Palffy and Murray—a sure candidate for coach of the year—are what's going right in L.A.



MINNESOTA WILD The goaltending platoon of **Manny Fernandez** and **Dwayne Roloson** is working again. The two had a particularly hot December, and Roloson headed into the new year among the league leaders in goals-against average and save percentage. The team has needed those two because it was hurting for offense, but that appears to be turning around as the calendar turns to 2004 and RW **Marian Gaborik** regains his timing and scoring touch. He's getting the most ice time of any Wild forward, so it should only be a matter of time. Lapses in concentration and poor decisions in its own zone are the wrongs that have cost the Wild points against conference opponents.



NASHVILLE PREDATORS Just a few words can sum up what's right in Music City: G **Tomas Vokoun** and confidence. Vokoun gives the team a chance to win every night. Factor in a big, come-from-behind victory in early November in Detroit, and the Predators know they can beat any team, anywhere. The balanced attack is a big positive. D **Marek Zidlicky** is chipping in offensively. The players are willing to stick up for one another and make a statement physically. As for what's wrong, key injuries to LWs **Scott Hartnell** and **Andreas Johansson** have hurt. For a team that must give its all to win, it likely will get more difficult.



PHOENIX COYOTES Inconsistency has plagued this team, which must rely on all-out effort and smart play because of a lack of stars. The Coyotes need better penalty killing, which often comes down to outworking the opposition. But plenty has gone right for this team; the playoffs are a legitimate possibility. G **Sean Burke** is healthy and has played well, and LW **Ladislav Nagy** and RW **Shane Doan** went through the first three months on a point-a-game pace. January is a critical time; G.M. **Mike Barnett** must decide whether the club has enough promise to keep it intact or whether he should make a deal or two.



ST. LOUIS BLUES G **Chris Osgood** is making a case to quiet the doubters and the annual question about the Blues' goaltending. The team has needed every save from Osgood because it has again been forced to overcome key injuries. The injured have included D **Al MacInnis**, D **Barret Jackman**, C **Doug Weight**, LW **Keith Tkachuk** and C **Pavol Demitra**. The offense has sputtered because there hasn't been consistent scoring beyond the first line. Not replacing Ws **Martin Rucinsky**, **Valeri Bure** and **Cory Stillman** hasn't helped. If Osgood's bruised leg, which was suffered in late December, is a serious injury, the Blues will be forced to shop for a goaltender.



SAN JOSE SHARKS It's easy to point to the scoring of C **Patrick Marleau** as what has gone right for the Sharks, who have turned themselves around and are in the playoff race after a shaky start. But D **Kyle McLaren** might be providing just as much of a spark with big hits that make forwards hesitant. As for what's gone wrong, G **Evgeni Nabokov's** play was not what the team had hoped, although his numbers are improving. After Nabokov faltered and later suffered a groin injury, backup G **Vesa Toskala** proved he can get the job done. Confidence in a backup goaltender is important down the stretch. The No. 1 goaltender can get rest while the team still gets much-needed points.



VANCOUVER CANUCKS On the power play, the Canucks, like many teams with a lot of skill, are guilty of trying to make pretty, complex plays instead of simple ones. Because of that, their power play has hurt them more than helped. A couple of games with simple power-play success would help the Canucks relieve their recent offensive woes. However, a lot has gone right with this team. Despite his slowed production, rookie RW **Jason King** has been a big plus alongside LW **Daniel Sedin** and C **Henrik Sedin**. They will regain their scoring touch and again provide the Canucks with a dangerous second line. And despite more attention after last season's success, the top line of LW **Markus Naslund**, C **Brendan Morrison** and RW **Todd Bertuzzi** hasn't lost a step. Add the underrated play of the team's defense, and you've got a lot of things going right.



LEE SPENCER'S INSIDER

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Restoration work under way

Eddie D'Hondt is an optimist. He has to be. In late October, he became the general manager at Robert Yates Racing. D'Hondt inherited a mess. Scour the web-sites for the biggest disappointments of 2003, and topping most lists are RYR and Dale Jarrett.

"I don't think that FOXSports or any of the other writers are going out on a diving board by making that statement," D'Hondt says. "And I don't think Dale or Robert (Yates) would disagree with that. But I choose to look at the glass as being half-full."

D'Hondt is a realist who enjoys a challenge. If he weren't, D'Hondt would not have lobbied for the position in the first place. He knew the resources available at RYR would allow him to help mold the organization into the powerhouse it once was. For six seasons, 1996-2001, Jarrett finished in the top five in points, including winning the Winston Cup title in 1999.

"Like most sport teams, race teams can move in cycles," says D'Hondt, 44, who previously worked for Bill Elliott and Ray Evernham in Winston Cup and most recently oversaw Damon Lusk's Busch team. "Similar to what the Tampa Bay Buccaneers went through this season. Last year they won the Super Bowl, and this year they didn't even make the playoffs. It's unlikely with the really strong, well-versed race teams, yet possible."

Jarrett's No. 88 team finished 26th and Elliott Sadler's No. 38 Yates team finished 22nd last season. It was the first time Jarrett finished outside the top 10 since 1995, the year he began racing for RYR.

At the start of last season, for the first time since the



BOB LEVERONE/TSN

operation expanded to two full-time cars in 1996, RYR moved its teams under one roof. The organization hoped to operate with a one-team concept, but because it had two rookie crew chiefs, the plan never panned out.

"Watching the three races that I was involved with this organization at the end of the season, it was easy to see they were still testing when they were unloading," D'Hondt says. "They were searching for answers to their struggles. I don't blame them for adopting that type of strategy, but at that point it becomes more of a test

on the weekends than a team being prepared for a race.

"We are now one organization that brings two cars to the track. We're working together, not against each other."

D'Hondt believes in RYR's people. He has evaluated the organization's systems and interviewed more than 100 employees. D'Hondt discovered a recurring sentiment—the people believe in Robert Yates and enjoy the working environment. D'Hondt knows that a little success will provide a lot of encouragement for the troops.

He has created a foundation for the company to return to its former stature by adding crew chief Mike Ford and shop foreman Barry Swift, who both left RYR after the 2000 season to oversee Elliott's team.

Ford and Swift will complement veteran Yates manager Todd Parrott. D'Hondt is confident the new Taurus body and engine heads will allow the Fords to catch up to the Chevrolets and Dodges. And he's also hoping that some of the momentum Mike Ford had with Elliott's No. 9 at the end of the season will carry over to RYR.

The pieces are in place for a comeback. For Yates' sake, let's hope it happens.

TSN

DISH INSIDE

Nextel Cup teams received a last-minute holiday gift from NASCAR in the form of a testing bonus. Starting this month through November 14, Cup teams will be allowed five two-day and four one-day tests. Rookies get seven two-day and five one-day tests. The only mandatory test sessions will occur before the Daytona 500. Last season,

non-rookie teams were allowed five tests of one or two days, and rookie teams were allowed seven. ... When **Sterling Marlin** returns from Saint Thomas, he'll work with the new and improved No. 40 Ganassi Racing crew. **Paul Clapprood**, who had been the front mechanic on Ganassi's No. 41 car, is the new car chief. **Randy Cox**, formerly the No. 41's car chief, is Marlin's new rear tire changer and will be an asset to the team on race weekends. Shocks specialist **Jeff Price** joins the team from the No. 49 car, and **Dave Atkins**

will be Marlin's spotter. ... After two seasons as a crew chief with Petty Enterprises, **Steven Lane** will bring his expertise to the No. 41 car and Ganassi sophomore **Casey Mears**. Lane will be the car chief and work with crew chief **Jimmy Elledge**. ... **Rusty Wallace's** newly formed Busch Series squad, with rookie driver **Billy Parker**, has tested at Charlotte, Kentucky and Lakeland (Fla.) and will test alongside Wallace later this month at Las Vegas, where the team is planning to make its debut in March. —L.S.

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DAVE SHEININ'S INSIDER

O's are done with slumming it

It wasn't all that long ago the Orioles were the virtual equals of the Yankees. The rivals, two of the biggest revenue producers and biggest spenders in the game, met in the 1996 ALCS, a series essentially decided by a 12-year-old boy's glove. Both made the playoffs again in 1997, the Orioles as wire-to-wire division champs.

But then their trajectories diverged sharply and quickly, the Yankees spending more and winning more (even if they eventually lost sight of which one was the ultimate goal), the aging Orioles sinking to fourth place in 1998 and remaining there ever since.

In the time since the Orioles last finished a season with a winning record, the Albert Belle era in Baltimore came and went. Cal Ripken's streak ended, then so did the Iron Man's playing days. Attendance at Camden Yards plummeted. The Ravens won a Super Bowl and disproved the notion that Baltimore was and always would be a baseball town. Former club vice president Syd Thrift's "Confederate money" went unclaimed by free agents.

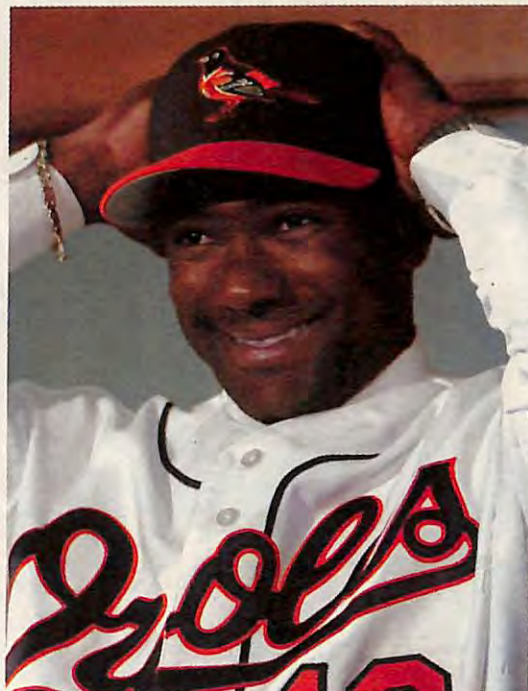
The Orioles eventually lost the will to compete in baseball's richest division, ceding the role of the Yankees' chief foil to the Red Sox and fielding a series of young, cheap, marginally talented teams that avoided the division cellar only through the graciousness of the perpetually awful Devil Rays.

Now, all of a sudden, six years after their last taste of success, the Orioles are like Paris Hilton at the end of *The Simple Life*: sick and tired of slumming it with the common folk and ready to return to a high-rent lifestyle.

Full of wild ambition, newly acquired talent and cash freed up by the expiration of several ill-fated contracts, the Orioles are ready to compete again. The only question is whether that still is possible in this age of \$200 million payrolls in the Bronx and reckless resolve in Beantown.

The reality of the American League East in 2004 is that the Orioles have added an All-Star shortstop (Miguel Tejada), an All-Star catcher (Javy Lopez) and a solid setup reliever (Mike DeJean) but still have not gained ground on the Yankees or Red Sox—or, for that matter, on the fortified Blue Jays. Vladimir Guerrero, the Hall of Fame-caliber right fielder of whom the Orioles are in hot pursuit, could close the gap considerably, of course.

During last month's winter meetings, when no one else seemed to be spending money, one prominent agent was asked whether the Orioles were controlling the market.



Baltimore put its money where its mouth is by signing Tejada to a six-year, \$72 million deal.

"At this point," he said, "the Orioles are the market."

Still unanswered is the question of how the Orioles expect to win with a starting rotation topped as of now by Kurt Ainsworth and Rodrigo Lopez.

Perhaps they will sign a solid starter (a return by Sidney Ponson is not out of the question), or perhaps they are content to wait until prospects such as Adam Loewen and Denny Bautista come of age in 2005. A word of warning, though: Some in the industry believe the Orioles overestimate the quality and depth of their pitching prospects.

SPEED READ

■ When was the last time the new year arrived with the best free-agent hitter (Vladimir Guerrero) and several top pitchers (Greg Maddux, Sidney Ponson) still unsigned? Try never. Agents are gambling that clubs won't be able to keep up their resolve as spring training nears. But calling someone's bluff in this high-stakes game could be dangerous.

But for a franchise and a city that has not had a slugger since Belle's retirement in 2000 or a compelling reason to watch since Ripken's farewell in 2001, the high-rent district—even if the Orioles can't really afford it—beats the simple life any day.

TSN

Dave Sheinin covers baseball for *The Washington Post*.

Did your favorite club make the right moves? For complete coverage of the latest offseason developments, go to www.foxsports.com, keyword: MLB.

INSIDE DISH

C Javy Lopez, who lost 30 pounds before last season, has a financial incentive to keep the weight off with the Orioles. The team will weigh Lopez four times a year, and if he comes in over a prescribed target, \$25,000 will be deducted from the first level of his performance bonuses. For example, if Lopez reaches 450 plate appearances, he will be paid a \$100,000 bonus. That will be cut by \$25,000 if he is overweight at one weigh-in. ... A name from the not-so-distant past: OF Greg Vaughn is among the Cardinals' nonroster invitees to spring training. Vaughn, who hit 95 homers in 1998-99, has been unable to keep a job since the Devil Rays let him go in '02. ... The Expos, who have managed to remain competitive despite Major League Baseball's bloodsucking in recent years, will be hard-pressed to keep it up. In addition to seeing their best pitcher (RHP Javier Vazquez) and best hitter (RF Vladimir Guerrero) leave, they may have to part with RHP Rocky Biddle, their closer, to save money. ... The Yankees are without a lefthanded starter after David Wells' departure to San Diego last week, and there are few suitable replacements available. The best lefty free agent still on the market is Kenny Rogers, who largely was a bust in the Bronx in the mid-'90s. And unless the Yanks dangle someone such as 2B Alfonso Soriano, no team will be willing to trade them a top-end southpaw. ... The Mariners will feel the loss of CF Mike Cameron a bit, but CF Randy Winn is ready to step up, and he should provide more offense than Cameron. Winn is a far better contact hitter than Cameron, and, as a former leadoff man, he utilizes his speed well. —Staff reports

ALL REPORTS



ANAHEIM ANGELS The team passed on the available free-agent and nontendered first basemen, so it may seek an outfielder—with RHPs **Ramon Ortiz** and **Ben Webber** and LHP **Jarrod Washburn** trade candidates—and consider moving CF **Darin Erstad** to first to protect his balky right hamstring. LF **Garret Anderson** has offered to move to center or right; RF **Jose Guillen** could play left. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** **Bartolo Colon** and **Kelvin Escobar** make it a strength. They should relieve pressure from Washburn, Ortiz, **John Lackey** and **Aaron Sele**, all of whom are better than they showed in 2003—particularly Washburn, the lone lefty, who added an effective changeup to his repertoire of fastballs. —**Doug Miller**



BALTIMORE ORIOLES Recently signed **Javy Lopez** will be used primarily as a catcher, but he also will be a DH and play some first base. ... RHP **Mike DeJean** is part of the rebuilt bullpen. The club wanted to reload with power arms, and he will be a middle reliever and setup man for closer **Jorge Julio**. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** The team's plan is to add a veteran pitcher, but it will rely on RHPs **Kurt Ainsworth** and **Rodrigo Lopez** and LHPs **Matt Riley** and **Eric DuBose** to grow into their roles. Ainsworth and DuBose have great stuff and rely more on their changeups as out pitches. Lopez is coming off a poor sophomore season. The club wants him to throw his fastball more and not rely entirely on his slider. Riley is the hardest thrower and was able to regain his velocity after elbow surgery. —**Gary Washburn**



BOSTON RED SOX The team has most of the pieces for a veteran-laden bench. C **Doug Mirabeli** is a strong defender and has some pop. OF **Gabe Kapler** provides offense, speed, defense and intensity. Also, the team has invited 1B/DH **Brian Daubach** to spring training. He could replace **Jeremy Giambi** as the lefty bat off the bench. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** If healthy, RHPs **Pedro Martinez** and **Curt Schilling** should be among the game's top 10 starters. Schilling will take pressure off Martinez, who doesn't throw as hard as he once did. Sinkerball RHP **Derek Lowe** has a durable arm. Knuckleball RHP **Tim Lincecum** defines dependability. The jury is out on the projected No. 5, RHP **Byung-Hyun Kim**. —**Ian Browne**



CHICAGO WHITE SOX Kelly Wunsch's sidearm delivery made him a natural to fill the lefty specialist role. But with free-agent RHPs **Tom Gordon** and **Scott Sullivan** gone, he'll get more work as a setup man. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** RHP **Bartolo Colon** is gone, but LHP **Mark Buehrle** and RHPs **Esteban Loaiza** and **Jon Garland** are the core of a unit that will be one of the team's strengths. They rely more on movement, changing speeds and pinpoint location to retire hitters than on power. LHP **Scott Schoeneweis** will move from the bullpen to the No. 4 spot; G.M. **Ken Williams** is not finished fine-tuning. —**Scott Merkin**



CLEVELAND INDIANS The team's lineup is all but set, but there still are holes in the rotation and bullpen. None of the free-agent pitchers still available is a difference-maker, so the team might end up reaching for a retread or hoping a prospect in Class AAA blossoms. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** Except for ace LHP **C.C. Sabathia** and whatever veteran free agent the team signs, the Indians will rely on starters with little experience. LHP **Cliff Lee** and RHP **Jason Davis** are the closest to having success. LHP **Jason Stanford** also has shown he is capable of winning. He will battle RHPs **Jake Westbrook**, **Chad Durbin** and **Jeremy Guthrie** for the final spot. All the youth could add up to another losing season. —**Justice B. Hill**



DETROIT TIGERS The team targeted free-agent RHP **Jason Johnson** because he fit its ideal profile—a veteran starter with finesse (a nasty curveball), velocity (mid-90s fastball) and upside. If pitching coach **Bob Cluck** can help Johnson limit his walks and hone his changeup, he could be a legitimate No. 1 starter. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** If Johnson can hold the No. 1 spot, LHP **Mike Maroth** and RHPs **Nate Cornejo** and **Jeremy Bonderman** will get more matchups against similar pitchers: finesse starters or, in Bonderman's case, aces in training. LHP **Nate Robertson** will battle RHP **Gary Knotts** for the fifth spot. —**Jason Beck**



KANSAS CITY ROYALS Free agent **Jay Payton**, a righthanded hitter, has surfaced as a possibility to fill the left field vacancy. Payton had a career-high 28 homers and 89 RBIs in 2003 with the Rockies. The incumbent is lefty-hitting **Matt Stairs**. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** LHP **Darrell May** emerged as the ace in 2003, with his calm demeanor and ability to work the corners. LHP **Brian Anderson** can keep hitters off-balance. LHP **Jeremy Affeldt** has a high-octane fastball, but blister problems may put him in the bullpen. In addition, the club hopes to get some mileage out of RHP **Kevin Appier**, and RHPs **Miguel Asencio** and **Kyle Snyder** are returning from arm surgeries. —**Chris Schaeffer**



MINNESOTA TWINS SS **Cristian Guzman** enters a contract year having failed to match his All-Star production of 2001. He needs to make his speed an asset by improving his on-base percentage with more walks and fewer strikeouts. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** Command is a key. When RHP **Brad Radke** has control of his fastball and changeup, he can get hitters to put the ball in play and rely on his defense for outs. For LHP **Johan Santana**, command of his 92-mph fastball sets up a 78-mph changeup that fools hitters. RHP **Kyle Lohse** finds trouble when he tries to overpower hitters with his fastball. Payroll concerns could give the final spots to prospects such as RHPs **Grant Balfour** and **J.D. Durbin**. —**Mark Sheldon**



NEW YORK YANKEES Recently signed **Kenny Lofton** likely will play center field, shifting **Bernie Williams** to DH. But look for manager **Joe Torre** to give Williams every chance to keep his job in spring training. One solution could have Williams in the field against lefthanded starters, against whom Lofton has struggled. That also would allow 1B **Jason Giambi** some games at DH. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** Newcomers **Kevin Brown** and **Javier Vazquez** join fellow righties **Mike Mussina**, **Jose Contreras** and **Jon Lieber**, so look for opposing teams to stack their lineups with lefty hitters. Mussina is the only one with significant success in the A.L., so the Yankees will have to gauge how Brown, Vazquez and Lieber adjust to the new league and how Contreras comes back in his sophomore season. —**Mark Feinsand**



OAKLAND ATHLETICS G.M. **Billy Beane** took a big gamble in signing LHP **Arthur Rhodes** to be the team's closer. Rhodes, an exceptional setup man with Seattle, has 17 saves in 44 career opportunities. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** Any staff that features LHPs **Barry Zito** and **Mark Mulder** and RHP **Tim Lincecum** is going to be considered one of the best, but the A's think they've upgraded it. Most assumed that LHP **Ted Lilly**'s trade to Toronto would put RHP **Rich Harden**, 22, in the No. 4 spot, but then the team added LHP **Mark Redman**, who won 14 games last year with the Marlins. That will take some pressure off Harden, who has drawn comparisons to Lincecum. —**Mychael Urban**



SEATTLE MARINERS Some may be a little frustrated that new G.M. **Bill Bavasi** hasn't signed any big-name free agents. But by acquiring solid but not spectacular position players in 3B **Scott Spiezio** and LF **Raul Ibanez**, a dependable outfield backup in **Quinton McCracken** and bullpen help in LHP **Eddie Guardado**, the team fortified itself for a run at the A.L. West title. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** LHP **Jamie Moyer** again leads the staff, which includes underrated **Ryan Franklin**, budding star **Joel Pineiro** and solid **Gil Meche**, all righthanders. The big question mark is RHP **Freddy Garcia**. If he displays in spring training some of the frustrating tendencies the Mariners grew weary of last season, he could be a trade candidate, possibly opening up a spot for RHP **Rafael Soriano**. —**Doug Miller**



TAMPA BAY DEVIL RAYS Veteran C **Brook Fordyce** is expected to have a positive influence on starter **Toby Hall**. Manager **Lou Piniella** expects his catchers to take charge of the pitching staff on the field. That often means settling down the younger pitchers and getting them to mix up their pitches. Hall must prove he can handle those chores, and Fordyce should help. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** This season, the club will determine whether the projected starters can fill the roles in the future. RHP **Victor Zambrano** likely will start on opening day, but RHP **Jeremi Gonzalez** was the Rays' most consistent starter in 2003 and has become the staff leader. Rookie RHP **Doug Waechter** has ace potential but still is learning. Rounding out the group are **Mark Hendrickson**, the rotation's only lefty, and RHP **Dewon Brazelton**, who was a standout in the Arizona Fall League. —**Paul C. Smith**



TEXAS RANGERS Recently signed OFs **Brian Jordan** and **David Dellucci** give the team tested veterans. But Jordan, who has played 150 games just once in a 12-year career, is coming off knee surgery, and Dellucci didn't fare well in the A.L. last year, hitting .176 in 21 games with the Yankees. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** There's little the team can do about RHP **Chan Ho Park**'s tricky back or ineffectiveness, so it will focus on the future. RHP **Colby Lewis** must learn to miss strategically with his mid-90s fastball and late-breaking slider. When healthy, RHP **Joaquin Benoit** showed potential. RHP **R.A. Dickey**, the team's top draft pick in 1996, began showing his worth last season, and RHP **Ricardo Rodriguez** bears watching. Expect a veteran to be added. —**Thomas Harding**



TORONTO BLUE JAYS **Valerio de los Santos** will be another lefty option in the bullpen. He'll likely split situational opportunities with **Jason Kershner**. De los Santos uses a high fastball as his out pitch and has an average slider and splitter. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** RHP **Roy Halladay** is still atop the rotation, but the rest of the staff is new. RHP **Miguel Batista** makes his living with a low-90s fastball. LHP **Ted Lilly**'s changeup and hard-breaking curve are his important pitches. RHP **Pat Hentgen** relies heavily on knowledge and experience. **Josh Towers** is a righthanded version of Lilly, albeit with less speed on the fastball. —**Spencer Fordin**

N.L. REPORTS



ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS The club has addressed its needs while staying within budget. **Shane Nance** and **Casey Fossum** will provide lefthanded bullpen depth, and 1B **Richie Sexson** is a legitimate No. 4 hitter who will take pressure off LF **Luis Gonzalez**. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** The club is counting on LHP **Randy Johnson** being healthy. RHP **Brandon Webb** will need to build on his outstanding rookie season as he replaces RHP **Curt Schilling** as the No. 2 starter. RHP **Elmer Dessens** is looking to bounce back after a disappointing 2003. Veteran RHPs **Shane Reynolds** and **Steve Sparks** will round out the rotation. —*Steve Gilbert*



ATLANTA BRAVES LHP **Armando Almanza**, a reliever, will be asked to refine his changeup in the hope that he will be equally effective against right-handed as lefthanded hitters. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** RHP **Russ Ortiz** and LHP **Mike Hampton** are All-Star caliber. LHP **Horacio Ramirez** and RHP **John Thomson** could be strong in the middle. Scouts believe Thomson will have a breakout season pitching in Turner Field. LHP **Jung Keun Bong** or RHP **Bubba Nelson** likely will be the fifth starter. Bong was a reliever last season. —*Mark Bowman*



CHICAGO CUBS The team needs more hitters like **Todd Walker**. He was the toughest to strike out in the A.L. last season; Cubs batters struck out second-most in the N.L. But where will Walker play? He could platoon with 2B **Mark Grudzielanek**. Walker is willing to try first, but **Derrek Lee** is set there. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** RHPs **Kerry Wood**, **Mark Prior**, **Carlos Zambrano** and **Matt Clement** may be the N.L.'s best starting foursome. They still are developing, though. Wood needs to maintain his focus. Prior needs to remain healthy for a full season. Zambrano must control his emotions. Clement must improve his command. RHP **Juan Cruz**, the potential No. 5 starter, could use a confidence boost. —*Carrie Muskat*



CINCINNATI REDS The signing of RHP **Cory Lidle** should upgrade the rotation, even though he led the A.L. in runs allowed last season. The Reds believe his sinker will give him an edge at Great American Ball Park. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** Was Lidle's second half slump last season the start of a decline? Was RHP **Paul Wilson**'s late-season shoulder trouble a warning sign? Can RHP **Jimmy Haynes** overcome back problems? What will RHPs **Jose Acevedo** and **Aaron Harang** do over a full big-league season? Many of these guys would be fourth or fifth starters on most staffs. Upgrading will be difficult given the team's lack of resources. —*Chris Haft*



COLORADO ROCKIES LF **Jeromy Burnitz**, like CF **Preston Wilson**, easily could strike out 150 times. But free swingers are rewarded at Coors Field. 3B **Vinny Castilla**, returning after four years, knows that very well. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** RHP **Jason Jennings** can be special if he can improve the location on his sinker. LHP **Joe Kennedy**'s cut fastball sets up his other pitches. RHP **Denny Stark**, healthy after suffering back problems, must limit walks. RHPs **Chin-hui Tsao** and **Jason Young** and LHP **Cory Vance** are unknowns. —*Thomas Harding*



FLORIDA MARLINS **Alex Gonzalez** arguably is the best fielding shortstop in the league. He has great range and is athletic. Gonzalez's offense is inconsistent, but he has surprising power. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** The team is banking on the starters' postseason experience to carry over. World Series MVP **Josh Beckett** clearly has emerged as the ace. RHP **Brad Penny** can dominate when he pitches smart and his curveball is on. RHP **Carl Pavano** finally is healthy. LHP **Dontrelle Willis**' conditioning could determine his success. RHP **A.J. Burnett**, coming back from elbow surgery, could be the key. —*Joe Frisaro*



HOUSTON ASTROS LHP **Carlos Hernandez**'s fastball was clocked as high as 95 mph in Venezuela as he continued his rehab from shoulder surgery. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** LHP **Andy Pettitte** gives the team three legitimate No. 1s, along with RHPs **Roy Oswalt** and **Wade Miller**. Pettitte jams righties with a hard cutter. Oswalt features a four-seam fastball and a late-breaking curve. Miller is successful when he doesn't toy with mechanics too much. RHP **Tim Lincecum** needs to maintain composure. Hernandez, RHPs **Brandon Duckworth** and **Jared Fernandez** and LHP **Jerome Robertson** are fifth-starter candidates. —*Alyson Footer*



LOS ANGELES DODGERS The team still needs a cleanup hitter, but signing RF **Vladimir Guerrero** remains a long shot. The shortage of impact free agents (**Juan Gonzalez**, **Jay Payton** and **Rafael Palmeiro** could fit) should send G.M. **Dan Evans** back to the trade market. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** This group has questions. RHP **Hideo Nomo** is coming off shoulder surgery. LHP **Odalis Perez** is being shopped. LHP **Kazuhisa Ishii** hasn't harnessed his talent. RHP **Jeff**

Weaver was shell-shocked in New York. RHP **Edwin Jackson** is only 20. RHP **Darren Dreifort** again is coming off surgery. The team re-signed LHP **Wilson Alvarez**, who out-pitched everyone late last season. —*Ken Gurnick*



MILWAUKEE BREWERS The team is banking on a comeback by RF **Ben Grieve**. Hitting coach **Butch Wynegar** wants Grieve to be more aggressive at the plate. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** Coaches say RHP **Ben Sheets** needs to master an off-speed pitch to complement his power pitches. RHP **Matt Kinney** is a slider specialist, and LHPs **Doug Davis** and **Wayne Franklin** are soft tossers. No. 5 could be LHP **Chris Capuano** or RHP **Wes Obermueller**. —*Adam McCalvy*



MONTREAL EXPOS The infield could be one of the best in the N.L. 3B **Tony Batista** has averaged 31 home runs the past five years. SS **Orlando Cabrera** and 2B **Jose Vidro** are stars, and 1B **Nick Johnson** is expected to play great defense and have a high on-base percentage. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** RHP **Livan Hernandez** is a solid No. 1. He is the only pitcher on the staff who can go nine innings consistently. RHPs **Tony Armas Jr.**, **Zach Day**, **Tomo Ohka** and **Claudio Vargas** all are questions. Armas is overpowering when healthy. Day must harness his sinker. Ohka must keep the ball down. Vargas has had shoulder problems. —*Bill Ladson*



NEW YORK METS The club believes free-agent RHP **Braden Looper** fills its need for a closer. Looper, 29, features a hard sinker, but he struggles to control it. Twice he lost the closer's job with the Marlins because of ineffectiveness. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** LHPs **Tom Glavine** and **Al Leiter** are a nice blend of finesse and power. RHP **Steve Trachsel** is a strong No. 3 now that he has narrowed his repertoire. RHP **Jae Weong Seo** is adding pitches. He's aggressive and throws strikes. The fifth starter likely will come from within. —*Kevin Czerwinski*



PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES There will be almost no competition for jobs in spring training. The starting lineup and rotation are secure, and the bench is complete and balanced. The team only needs to decide whether it will keep 11 or 12 pitchers. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** This is one of the N.L.'s deepest rotations. It's also tenacious, durable and flexible. RHP **Vicente Padilla**'s high-90s fastball is electric. RHP **Kevin Millwood**, LHP **Eric Milton** and RHP **Brett Myers** also can throw hard, and they use other pitches and rely more on location. LHP **Randy Wolf** never gives in to batters and is well-prepared. —*Ken Mandel*



PITTSBURGH PIRATES The team's most pressing needs are in the bullpen. RHP **Juan Acevedo**, who had 28 saves for the Tigers in 2002, is one option at closer. The bullpen also lacks experienced middle relievers. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** RHP **Kris Benson** has electric stuff and again is healthy. RHP **Kip Wells** has erased the "soft" label he had earlier in his career. RHP **Josh Fogg** relies on location and a bulldog approach. LHP **Oliver Perez**, a hard thrower with a nasty slider, needs to improve his command. LHP **Dave Williams**, RHP **Ryan Vogelsong** and perhaps a veteran free agent will compete for the fifth spot. —*Ed Eagle*



ST. LOUIS CARDINALS **Kerry Robinson**'s chances of getting more at-bats are increasing. The speedy Robinson might be part of a left field committee that also includes slick-fielding **So Taguchi** and possibly free agent **Orlando Palmeiro**. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** RHP **Matt Morris** is an elite power pitcher when healthy. RHP **Woody Williams** is savvy and has underrated stuff. RHP **Chris Carpenter** was a rising star with a deep repertoire before a series of injuries. RHP **Jeff Suppan** relies on throwing to spots. If RHP **Jason Marquis** harnesses his blazing fastball and hard slider, this could be a formidable unit. —*Matthew Leach*



SAN DIEGO PADRES G.M. **Kevin Towers** hasn't been able to build the team around new Petco Park because he doesn't know how the park will play. Dead center is only 396 feet away but right center is 411. The 322-foot porch in right could help lefthanded hitters. It's also unclear how the ball will carry. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** This is an upgrade from 2003. LHP **David Wells** still is a workhorse at 40; he threw 213 innings last year with the Yankees. RHP **Brian Lawrence**'s average fastball dances and his slider breaks hard. RHP **Adam Eaton** is a tough competitor. RHP **Jake Peavy** throws in the low 90s. LHP **Sterling Hitchcock** and RHP **Ismael Valdes** provide depth. —*Rich Draper*



SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS C **A.J. Pierzynski** and OFs **Dustin Mohr** and **Michael Tucker** should make a big impact. Mohr is a good defender with an above-average arm, and he has power. Tucker is versatile. Pierzynski doesn't have **Benito Santiago**'s savvy, but his hitting is worth the trade-off. **ROTATION ANALYSIS:** This is a relatively average group, save for ace RHP **Jason Schmidt**. LHP **Kirk Rueter** should rebound from injuries. RHP **Jerome Williams** should mature. RHP **Kevin Correia** will benefit from regular duty and better conditioning. RHP **Dustin Hermanson** is a bulldog who knows his craft. —*Rich Draper*

Insights from the editors of the Ultimate Fantasy Source, your online fantasy authority. <http://fantasy.sportingnews.com>

PLAY ACTION

by GEORGE WINKLER

Forget the old standard that you must use your first two draft picks on running backs. If the 2003 season proved anything, it's that high-quality backs can be had much later—like after Week 6 on the waiver wire. The trick is figuring out where to draft this season's surprises heading into next season.

Domanick Davis, Texans. Despite not starting until Week 7 and being inactive for two games, Davis rushed for 1,031 yards and eight touchdowns in his rookie season. What makes his future even brighter is that he is a pass-catching threat (47 receptions, 351 yards) in an offense with burgeoning talent around him.

Projected '04 pick: second or third round.

Rudi Johnson, Bengals. Corey Dillon likely has played his last game in a Bengals uniform. That's great news for Johnson, who rushed for 957 yards and nine touchdowns despite having to share the workload. An average of 4.5 yards a carry helped him pile up numbers quickly.

Projected '04 pick: second or third round.

Brian Westbrook, Eagles. A 5-8, 200-pound dynamo, he can score as a runner or as a receiver. He also took two punt returns the distance this season. His versatility helped him lead the team with 13 scores, and his touches will increase with Duce Staley likely to leave the Eagles. **Projected '04 pick: third or fourth round.**

Onterio Smith, Vikings. The season was frustrating at times for his owners, but Smith turned out to be worth the wait.

Filling in for injured starter Michael Bennett, Smith rushed for 148 and 146 yards in Weeks 15 and 16. His value

could rise or fall depending on the Vikings' plans for Bennett and Moe Williams.

Projected '04 pick: fifth or sixth round.

M@IL BONDING

ROB HURTT ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS

I have Ahman Green, Michael Bennett and Stephen Davis. I can have only three keepers, and I am trying to trade Bennett and Davis for a high-quality back. I could then keep Tony Gonzalez or Joe Horn. Do you think making this type of trade is wise?

Michael Randall, Duarte, Calif.

Michael: Fantasy owners too often overlook this



Tomlinson

DILIP VISHWANATH / TSN

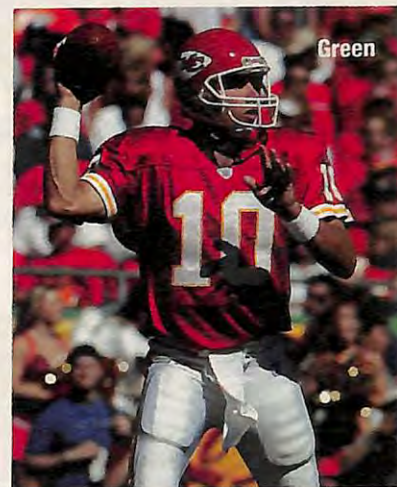
strategy of trading two very good options for one great option. It works in the regular season as long as there is a decent replacement on the waiver wire. And in the offseason, it makes perfect sense. Depth means nothing if you can't keep all those players, so whittle your roster until you have three strong keeper candidates.

There probably is an owner out there with an elite back, such as Priest Holmes or LaDainian Tomlinson, but not much depth after that. A 2-for-1 deal will help you both. You get an elite rusher, and your trade partner gets more depth.

TSN Games Tip of the week

Smart shoppers know that buying in bulk pays off. It's the same way in Toyota Tundra Double Cab Playoff Fantasy Football. Managers field a seven-man roster, but they get just one free trade every week. It's essential in building a roster to avoid loading up on players who are likely to be eliminated quickly in the postseason. Rock-solid regular-season choices such as Chiefs quarterback Trent Green might not be so valuable in a one-and-done scenario. However, you can eliminate much of this worry by purchasing a bundle of trades and get a great value in the process. One extra trade costs 99 cents, but a dozen is just \$9.95. With the extra moves in the last two weeks of the playoffs, your team will be in the hunt for prize money, even if Green's team is not. —Rob Hurtt

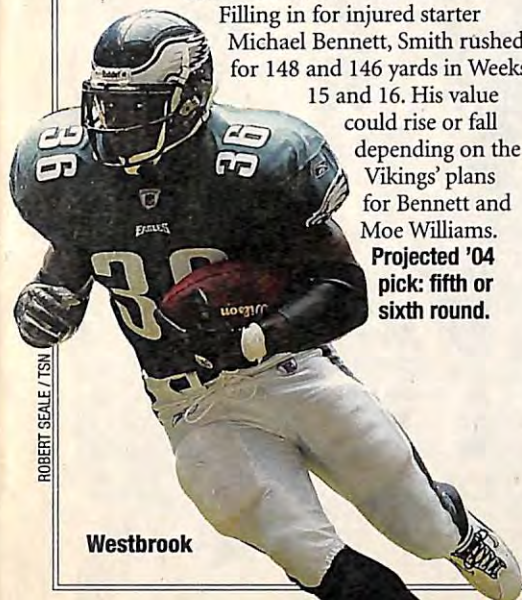
To get your free Playoff Fantasy Football team, go to <http://fantasygames.sportingnews.com/football/playoffs>.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

GRIDIRON GURUS

	George Winkler Senior Editor	Chris Bahr Associate Editor	Rob Hurtt Associate Editor
Fantasy Football MVP	Priest Holmes	Priest Holmes	Do you have to ask?
My best move	Picking up Rudi Johnson (and three games of 150-plus yards) at midseason.	Picking up Eddie Kennison before kickoff in Week 10. (He got me a win.)	Drafting Michael Bennett in the 17th round.
My worst move	Playing Dante Hall as a receiver when he had a negative score.	Never starting Javon Walker when he actually scored.	Sitting Chris Chambers on Thanksgiving (missing out on three touchdowns).
I'll never draft ... again	Anthony Thomas	Drew Bledsoe	Kurt Warner and Donald Driver
Best thing about fantasy football	Chicks dig stats geeks.	Every game counts every week.	Winning it all.
Next year, I'll ...	Wait to draft a tight end (Shockey!).	Stop counting on Niners and Giants.	Win it all again.
If I scored a TD, I'd ...	Hand the ball to the ref.	Write my cell phone number on the ball.	Avoid drawing a fine the size of an average person's salary.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

Westbrook



DAVE KINDRED

dkindred@sportingnews.com

The \$40 million lesson

Way back in 1997, when they were college coaching geniuses, Florida football's Steve Spurrier and Kentucky basketball's Rick Pitino agreed to a dual interview with the *SPORTING NEWS*. There was one condition. Spurrier asked that we include his favorite coach, Pat Summitt of Tennessee women's basketball. "She's a ball coach just like us," Spurrier said, "cept maybe better."

Before it could happen, Pitino left for the NBA's Celtics and a \$50 million deal that made him coach, president, general manager and Emperor Forever of The New Athens. When Forever turned out to be 3½ seasons of grinding failure—bad trades, bad drafts, bad play—Pitino conceded defeat. He left half the money on the table, in essence paying \$25 million for his freedom from professional basketball.

His brother-in-law and best friend, Billy Minardi, had counseled Pitino against the NBA. "He knew that I live and die so much with wins and losses, and he felt that 82 games is not what I need for my health," Pitino said in December 2001, by then safe at the University of Louisville. "He knew I enjoyed the relationships of college basketball. All along, he was the wise one."

But then, it wasn't Minardi being seduced by \$50 million. Three years into the Celtic experience, Pitino said, "A player asked, 'Coach, would you have gone to the Celtics if they'd given you the same amount of money as Kentucky?' I said, 'Of course not.' When I made that statement, I realized I was a hypocrite. I'd learned how much happiness money can bring you. Very little."

Pitino hadn't finished his first season at Louisville before Spurrier heard the Redskins say, "How's \$25 million sound?"

Maybe no one said precisely those words, but there's little doubt Spurrier knew he'd hear something like them as soon as he raised his hand for an NFL job. Still, he consistently said the money didn't matter.

"Shoot, the Gators paid me too much, anyway," he said, that number being maybe \$2 million a year.

But if we've learned anything about sports today, it's that when anyone says the money doesn't matter, it matters. And the Redskins' owner, Dan Snyder, apparently learning nothing from the Pitino example, didn't so much seduce Spurrier as overwhelm him.

At \$5 million a year for five years, Spurrier would be paid maybe twice as much as any other coach in the league. Pitino at least had the NBA on his resume, including a playoff appearance as the Knicks' head coach. Spurrier had never coached a day in the NFL.

But the Redskins' Snyder took it for granted that what Spurrier had done at the college level, he could do in the NFL.

Nope. Now Spurrier is gone. Two seasons, and he walks. Won 12 games, lost 20. Rather than extend the suffering, he gives up \$15 million. Says he'll take a year off, then consider college jobs.

While the Pitino and Spurrier experiences are similar, there's an important difference.

Pitino had carte blanche, complete control. He micromanaged every detail of his time in Boston. When trades didn't work, when the draft provided no help, when the Celtics remained mired among the league's dregs, Pitino could blame no one but himself.

Spurrier's failure was of a different kind. He was the coach, nothing else. He had a say in choosing players, but only a say often overruled by the owner. Snyder was demonstrably incompetent to make personnel decisions; he'd never played, never scouted, never worked in football. But he believes fervently and without exception in the golden rule: he who has the gold rules. So Snyder appointed himself the team's de facto general manager.

Spurrier may have failed to impose discipline on the Redskins; at season's end, some players suggested as much even as others denied it. In any case, there are several explanations for such failure. Maybe Spurrier, never a firebreather, didn't understand that millionaire players need to live in fear of the coach, otherwise they ignore him. Or maybe, once the owner-general manager showed those millionaire players that he didn't have confidence in the coach, they lost confidence as well.

Snyder did that by bringing in "consultants" to help Spurrier early in the 2003 season. "Consultants" for a \$25 million coach long considered one of football's best thinkers? Oh, please.

On top of an insult so egregious it must have left Spurrier's players wondering exactly when he'd resign rather than submit to further public humiliation, Snyder twisted the knife by making a phone call to Jimmy Johnson. The owner wanted to know, Johnson reported on national television, about the difficulties a coach faced moving from college to the pros.

Johnson found it hilarious that a Redskins owner would be calling an old Cowboys coach for advice. In other venues, such as the Redskins' locker room, some folks might have thought, "Spurrier's putting up with that?"

There are many lessons in the Pitino/Spurrier experiences, but the primary one is this: at the highest levels of professional athletics, success absolutely is a team effort. Pitino couldn't do it without help; Spurrier couldn't do it with incompetent help.

How unhappy did all that make them?

They walked away from \$40 million.

That is wicked unhappy. **TSN**

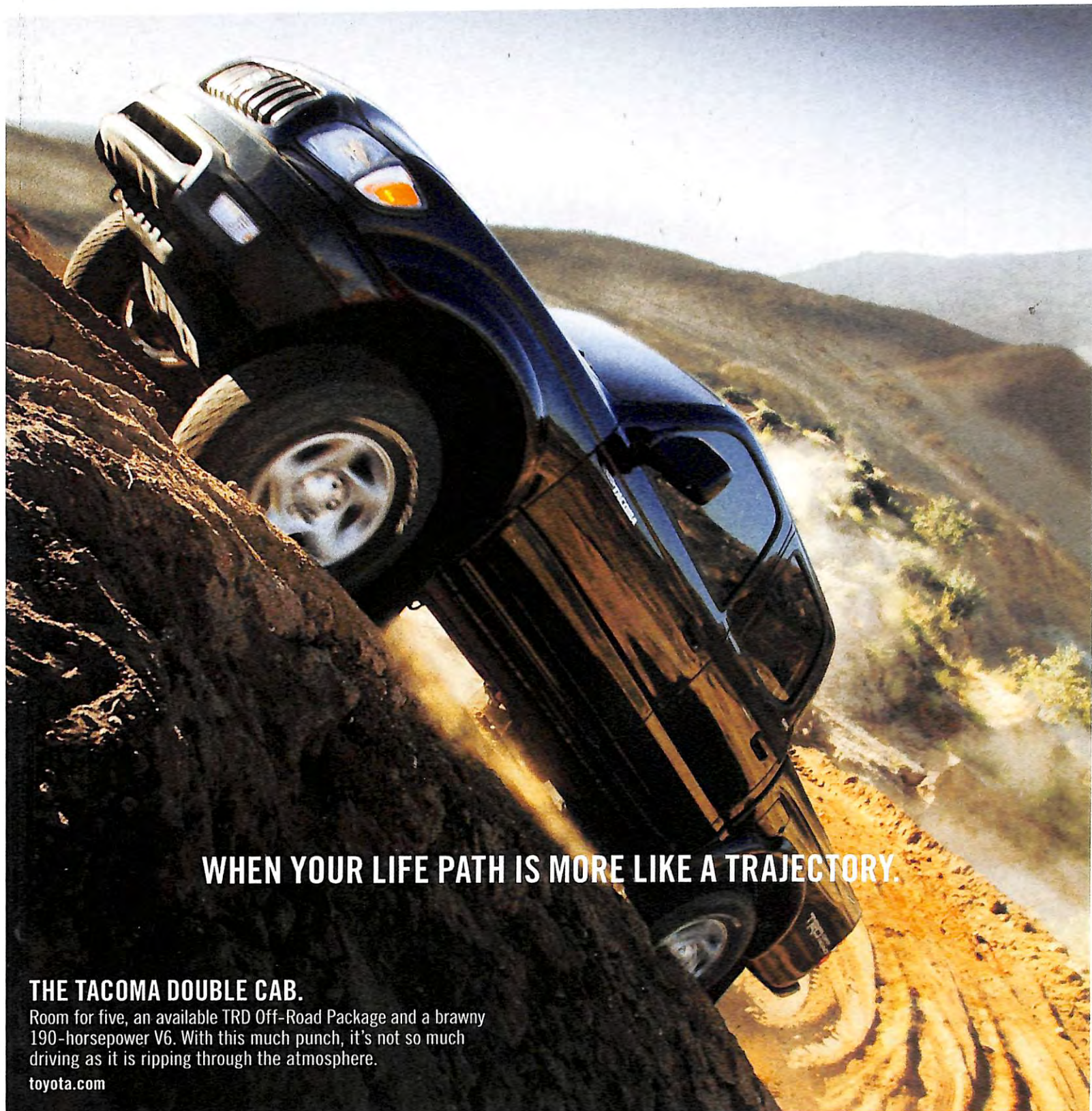
Both Pitino (left) and Spurrier found out that making millions can't make up for the agony of gut-wrenching losses.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN (2)

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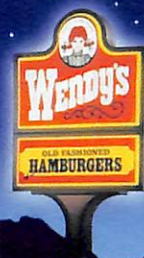
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